

Bahraini Police Attack Shia Mosque During Friday Prayers

NICOSIA — Riot police attacked thousands of Shia Muslims at Friday prayers in Manama after authorities closed most Shia mosques in the Bahraini capital, residents said.

Before weekly prayers at the Ras al-Roman Mosque, the faithful shouted slogans demanding the restoration of Parliament, dissolved in 1975, and the release of detainees, including Sheikh Abdel Amir al-Jamri, the main leader of the Shia opposition who was arrested at the beginning of 1996. (Contd on Pg. 14)



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Israeli General Resigns Under Pressure for Meeting With Peres

TEL AVIV — A senior Israeli general resigned on Friday after being suspended from his position as a key negotiator with the Palestinians for having held private meetings with opposition leader Shimon Peres.

General Oren Shahor submitted his resignation as coordinator for Israeli military activities in the occupied territories to Defense Minister Yitzhak Mordechai at a meeting Friday morning, his spokesman said. (Contd on Pg. 14)


Photo: Mojtaba Takin

Leader Warns Muslims of Plots Hatched by Arrogant Powers

Tehran Times Service

TEHRAN — The Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei said that the agents of arrogant powers and Zionist elements are seeking to make the nations accept the self-serving policies of the domineering powers and submit to their diktat.

The Leader made the above statement in a meeting with thousands of Iranian people from all walks of life here on Thursday on the occasion of the birth anniversary of Imam Mahdi (May Allah Hasten His Messianic Return), the Twelfth Imam of the Infallible Household of the Holy Prophet (S).

Ayatollah Khamenei stated, "Domineering powers would like to see the nations ignorant, unaware, inactive and lacking in motives and aspirations - an ideal condition for those powers from which they can derive maximum benefit."

The Leader also pointed out that the belief in the messianic return of Imam Mahdi (AS) would cause the oppressed nations not to be content with the status quo and await the improvement of conditions. The grand ayatollah noted that the arrogant powers make every effort to shatter and extinguish the hopes of the deprived and oppressed nations and draw their attention to the worldly materialistic attractions, which are at the disposal of the domination-seeking powers.

Ayatollah Khamenei concluded by underlining that the arrogant powers and the Zionist circles exploit enticing slogans such as human rights, women's rights and fundamental rights as effective instruments for imposing their hegemonic policies on nations.

France Not to Take Part in New Iraq Surveillance Force

PARIS — France will not take part in a new multinational force to protect Kurds in northern Iraq, the French Foreign Ministry announced here on Friday.

The new air force will replace Operation Provide Comfort, set up in Turkey after the Persian Gulf war in 1991 by Turkey, France, Britain and the United States.

In a communique, the ministry said the French would not take part because the "humanitarian aspect" of Provide Comfort was no longer included.

The new force has been agreed by Turkey, the United States and Britain.

Unlike Provide Comfort, the new six-month mission — approved by the Turkish Parliament on Wednesday — has no ground aspect.

However, U.S. and British aircraft based at Incirlik in southern Turkey will continue to fly surveillance missions over northern Iraq.

Despite its decision, the French Foreign Ministry said France would continue to take part in Operation Southern Watch "alongside its Saudi, American and British partners."

The communique said that French aircraft would fly only south of the 32nd parallel, although the United States extended the no-fly zone to the 33rd parallel after an Iraqi offensive against a Kurdish faction ealy in September.

The communique also reiterated France's "determination to call on Iraq to conform fully with all UN Security Council resolutions so that it can regain its place in the international community."

In September France briefly suspended its participation in allied missions over southern Iraq after objecting to the U.S. decision to enlarge the no-fly zone and expressing reservations over U.S. missile attacks on Iraqi targets.

Many Turkish MPs have expressed concern about the continuation of the allied operation, saying it could lead to the creation of an independent Kurdish state in the north of Iraq, something Ankara is opposed to at all costs. (AFP)

Yeltsin Meets Chinese Premier

MOSCOW — President Boris Yeltsin on Friday met visiting Chinese Premier Li Peng, the Kremlin leader's first foreign visitor since he returned to work after heart surgery, Interfax news agency said.

It quoted Yeltsin as saying he was happy with the pace of bilateral relations highlighted by his visit to China in April.

"Our strategic agreements reached in Beijing work, Interfax (Contd on Pg. 14)

Armenia Hails Iran's Impartial Role in Region

By Soraya Dezhbankhan

YERAVAN, Armenia — Armenian President Levon Ter Petrossian here on Wednesday night praised Iran's impartiality in regional issues, especially in it's efforts to help settle regional crises.

He made the remark in a meeting with visiting Iranian Vice-President Hassan Habibi, who is here on a 5-day official visit.

Alluding to successful efforts of Tehran for hammering regional conflicts, Petrossian called on Iran to play a more active role in the settlement of the Karabakh dispute. He further praised Iran's strategic role in the preservation of global peace and tranquility.

Expressing satisfaction over the growing trend of bilateral trade and economic ties, and referring to ample potentials for further expansion of bilateral ties, the Armenian president called for boosting Tehran-Yerevan cooperation in all fields.

He expressed hope that the current visit of the Iranian delegation would speed up implementation of agreements previously reached between the two countries.

Habibi conveyed the greetings of President Rafsanjani to his Armenian counterpart. Iran maintains that regional peace and stability will provide the ground for further expansion of economic and trade ties in the region, Habibi stressed, adding that regional issues and problems should be solved by regional countries themselves, without interference from outsiders.

Trilateral cooperation among Iran, Armenia and Turkmenistan will guarantee regional peace and stability, Habibi added.

Iran is for the promotion of political and cultural ties with Central Asian and Caucasian countries; to this end it tries to settle regional crises through peaceful channels.

Iran and Armenia can contribute to the preservation of regional peace and stability, Habibi said while addressing a dinner banquet held in his honor on Wednesday by the Armenian president.

Expressing satisfaction over the growing trend of bilateral cultural, scientific, trade and economic cooperation, Habibi said that identifying ample potentials and rich resources of the two countries by the Iranian-Armenian Joint Economic Commission will help foster the two countries' interests.

After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, while using its ample economic potentials, its rich energy resources, and regarding its outstanding geopolitical status, Iran tried to expand relations with the independent republics.

Iran's First Vice-President Hassan Habibi arrived here on Wednesday afternoon and was welcomed by Armenian Prime Minister Armen Sarkissian. (Contd on Pg.14)

Arafat to Meet Mordechai, Netanyahu

BAIT-UL-MOQADDAS — Palestinian President Yasser Arafat will meet early next week with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his defense minister to wrap up an Al-Khalil accord, a Palestinian negotiator said Friday.

"There will be a meeting on Sunday between President Arafat and (Israeli Defense Minister Yitzhak) Mordechai and then after (Contd on Pg.14)

OSCE Envoy: Serbian Opposition Won Elections

GENEVA — OSCE envoy Felipe Gonzalez said Friday that opponents of President Slobodan Milosevic won municipal elections in 14 Serbian cities and towns last month that were later invalidated.

Submitting his findings after a (Contd on Pg.14)



BELGRADE, Yugoslavia (December 24): Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic raises his hands as he greets cheering supporters during a rally organized by his Socialist Party in Belgrade. Clashes broke out as large numbers of government and opposition supporters held rival rallies in the capital. A member of the opposition was critically injured when he was shot during the conflict. (AFP PHOTO)

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In the Name of God

Surely those who guard (against evil), when a visitation from the Shaitan afflicts them they become mindful, then lo! they see.

(HOLY QORAN) (7:201)

OPINION

Regional Development, Key to Peace and Stability

With the disintegration of the Soviet Union a new chapter has opened in the history of the region.

On the one hand, we face regional conflicts which flared up in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet system, and on the other hand, we see opportunities for closer cooperation among the countries of the region.

It has not been fully realized that the raison d' etre of all disputes and skirmishes is underdevelopment. True, some regional conflicts have their roots in certain historical disputes. But without doubt they can be overcome through regional development.

A sense of insecurity lies behind most regional conflicts and disputes; each country or group wishes to increase its security through access to greater resources, land and so forth.

Instead of irredentism, regional countries must try to remove barriers to regional cooperation, for it will really guarantee their security.

In its effort to boost regional cooperation, the Islamic Republic of Iran has followed a two-pronged strategy since the disintegration of the former Soviet Union.

On the one hand, Iran encourages bilateral and multilateral cooperation in the region; on the other hand, it has left no stone unturned in helping to bring about peace to the region.

Iran has been turned into a hub of regional cooperation and, at the same time, a center of mediation for regional reconciliation.

The frequent visits of Iranian top officials to the region, including the present visit of First Vice-President Hassan Habibi to Armenia, and his forthcoming visit to Tajikistan, as well as visits of high-ranking officials of the countries of the region to Iran, are all indications of Iran's endeavors to boost regional development.

Development is a pre-requisite for peace; peace is a pre-requisite for development. Underdevelopment is a seed for cultivating regional disputes. Hence, regional countries should take all possible steps to enhance development in order to remove the grounds for disputes and conflicts.

Armenian FM Lauds Iran's Treatment of Religious Minorities

By Soraya Dezhbankhan

YEREVAN-Armenia — Armenian Foreign Minister, Alexander Arzumanian, here Thursday applauded the status of religious minorities especially Armenians in Iran.

He made the remark in a meeting with visiting Iranian Vice President Hassan Habibi.

Referring to the freedom, religious minorities have in Iran, Arzemanian said, "We witness, closely, the Islamic and developed treatment of Iranian government and people with religious minorities and especially with the Armenians.

Poisonous and biased propaganda of the enemies will never affect our attitude in this regard, the Armenian officials stressed.

Habibi said that unfortunately human rights has become a political means in the hands of certain countries to condemn independent countries which do not bow before the arrogance.

Under the pretext of human rights, enemies try to impede and hinder the development of the independent states, Habibi added.

He stressed that those countries which introduce themselves as defenders of human rights make the worst crimes against even the most basic and fundamental rights of the people, either their own nationals or nationals of other countries across the world.

Arzumanian further praised Iran's peaceful stance regarding the Karabakh dispute and averted, "We will never forget the fact that the first official cease-fire between Azerbaijan and Armenia was established under Tehran's peaceful efforts.

As Armenia believes in Iran's peaceful intention and good will, it desires for consultation with the Islamic Republic in the regional issues, Arzumanian stated.

Karabakh dispute should be solved due to humanitarian considerations through peaceful channels, Habibi stressed.

Describing his visit to Armenia as fruitful, he expressed hope for speedy implementation of the agreements reached during his visit to Yerevan.

According to another development, here Thursday, Habibi attended the Parliament and held discussions with Armenian Parliament Speaker Babken Araktsian, who called for promotion of Tehran-Yerevan ties in all domains including cultural, parliamentary and scientific areas.

Russian Deputy FM: Tehran-Moscow Relations Harmless to Others

Tehran Times Service

TEHRAN — The U.S. should bear in mind that Russia has the right to promote its relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran according to the joint interests of the two countries, said the Deputy Foreign Minister of Russia for Middle East Affairs Viktor Passiv Aliok in Moscow Wednesday.

According to IRNA, the Russian official added that his country was to further broaden relations with Iran without prejudice to Moscow's relations with any other country. He indicated that the Russian government would continue her support to Iran for a nuclear power plant being made in the Persian Gulf port city of Bushehr. He observed that Iran's project was solely for peaceful purposes.

Kharrazi: No Need to Establish Relations With U.S.

Tehran Times Service

TEHRAN — The Islamic Republic of Iran does not need to establish relations with the United States, said the Iranian Permanent Representative to the UN Kamal Kharrazi on Thursday.

Interviewed by the London-based Saudi weekly *Al-Majala*, Kharrazi added, "However if the U.S. was to establish good ties with Iran, it should change its policies."

Answering a question why Iran does not intend to have relations with the U.S., which is said to be a powerful country, Kharrazi said that Iran's economy was strong enough and growing at five percent annually and that 90 percent of the domestic need was met within the country, IRNA reported.

Asked why the Islamic Iran was distancing itself from the United States knowing well that country exercised great influence over Europe and other countries in the world, which could lead to Iran's isolation, Kharrazi reiterated that Iran does not need the U.S. protection. On the contrary, it is the U.S. itself which would be the major loser.

"Any change in our position will entirely depend on American administration's good will," stated Kharrazi in response to the reporter's question on his viewpoint regarding U.S. desire to remove its differences with Iran.

Concerning the Islamic Republic's attitude towards U.S. request for holding secret talks with Iran, Kharrazi said that Iranian officials did not see any problem on holding either open or secret negotiations.

However, he added, the United States wants to hold talks in order to impose its domination over the Islamic Iran and it does not act on the basis of mutual respect and equality.

The United States administration must initially prove its good intention and then talk about removing its differences with Islamic Iran.

Asked to comment on Americans' humiliation after the takeover of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran (the spy den), Kharrazi said that Americans were the last people on the earth to talk of their humiliation.

He added that the Americans did n· know that it was the Iranians who were, in fact, initially humiliated when the CIA intervened to overthrow the national government in 1953 in order to reinstate the ousted Shah of Iran to the throne.

Kharrazi stressed that the only

(Contd on Pg. 15)

President Receives Message From Turkmen Counterpart

Tehran Times Service

TEHRAN — A written message from the President of Turkmenistan Saparmurat Niyazov was handed to President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani here Tuesday.

The president received the message in a meeting with the Turkmen Vice President Orazgendi Aydogdyev and the Turkmen Education Minister Mohammad Abalakov.

According to IRNA, in his message the Turkmen president hoped for further promotion of the two countries' scientific and cultural ties and expansion of political and economic cooperation.

Describing the purpose of their visit to Iran, the Turkmen officials said they were in Tehran to follow up the agreements reached in the two letters of understanding between the two nations in the fields of culture and science.

Referring to the two countries historic commonalties, Abalakov said that the Turkmen government and people are eager to commemorate the first anniversary of the historical inauguration of Mashhad-Sarakhs-Tajan railroad link as Iran-Turkmenistan Friendship Day.

Aydogdyev, for his part, assessed the outcome of his meetings with the Iranian cultural and educational officials as positive, saying that Turkmenistan was keen on the exchange of professors and university students between the two countries particularly in the field of Persian language.

President Rafsanjani in response, welcomed Tehran-Ashkhabad promotion of scientific, cultural and economic bilateral relations, expressing hope that cultural, educational and scientific relations will further pave the way for promotion of economic and political bilateral relations.

Rafsanjani also announced Iran's readiness to transfer its experience in the fields of culture, science and education to the Central Asian Republic of Turkmenistan.

Ambassador: Tehran-Ashkhabad Relations Firm

Tehran Times Service

TEHRAN — The Iranian Ambassador to Ashkhabad Mehdi Mirabutalebi said on Wednesday that Iran-Turkmenistan relations are firm and strongly growing over the past five years.

According to IRNA, the Iranian diplomat made the remark at the first session of Irano-Turkmen Friendship Group which was held at the Iranian Embassy in Ashkhabad.

Mirabutalebi said that the formation of the group would serve as an effective means to help promote all-out ties between the two countries and bring both Iranian and Turkmen nations closer.

The Iranian ambassador said that the embassy was ready to cooperate with members of the friendship group and expressed optimism that by working out definite programs, the group would be able to help the governments of the two countries expand mutual cooperation.

Continuation of War in Afghanistan Detrimental to Regional Security

Tehran Times Service

TEHRAN — Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister for Asia- Pacific, Alaeddin Boroujerdi, said that continuation of fightings in Afghanistan is detrimental to the regional security and should come to an end as soon as possible.

Boroujerdi made the remark in a meeting with the head of Afghan government Burhanuddin Rabbani in Takhar, the capital city of Talukan Province of Afghanistan.

According to an IRNA report, the Iranian deputy minister also voiced Tehran's concern over the continued crisis in Afghanistan

He said that Iran would follow its policy to help end Afghan crisis until restoration of tranquility in the neighboring country.

Rabbani, for his part, thanked Iran for its ceaseless support in helping establish peace and stability in his country and said that any decision to solve the problem should be made in accordance with the interests of all tribes and inside the Afghan borders.

He blamed foreigners' intervention in Afghanistan's internal affairs as main factor for the country's problems.

The two sides underlined the need for mutual understanding among all groups and restoration of peace and stability in Afghanistan.

Iran's Pars-Jonoubi Oil Field Contains 300 Trillion Cubic Feet of Gas

Tehran Times Service

TEHRAN - Some 300 trillion cubic feet of gas, worth over $1,000 billion, is predicted to be locked in the Iranian part of Pars-Jonoubi gas field, said the Onshore Oil Production Department Director at the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC) Ismaeel Jalilian here on Monday.

The quantity of gas in the region is believed to be at 500 trillion cubic feet.

In an exclusive interview with IRNA here on Monday, Jalilian said that Iran's Oil Engineering and Development Company was engaged in enforcing the first phase of a project for the expansion of Pars-Jonoubi. However, he added, the source to finance the following phases of the project was not yet available.

Jalalian said that Iran and Abu Dhabi have undertaken a joint venture to expand Salman gas field, which is said to contain seven billion dollar worth natural gas.

Salman, he added, one of Dalan-Kangan layers, has a reserve of 5,240 billion cubic feet of gas and over 105 million barrels of liquefied oil.

The Iranian official said that French TOTAL company was now working to exploit the Sirri-E and Sirri-A oil fields based on a fixed schedule.

He added that extraction of oil from the two oil fields had considerably increased following exploration of two extended oil wells, but to estimate precise amount of the fields' deposits required some more computation work.

Elsewhere in his remarks, the Iranian official said that his company was to set up a complex on Bandar Abbas (Hormuzgan) sea shores in order to exploit Sirri-A and Sirri-E fields.

He added that in light of facilities provided, the country would be fully capable of building platforms in the sea and implement offshore projects in near future.

Jalalian said that his company had put the renting of offshore installations and oil drilling rigs in Sirri-E and Sirri-A fields on international tender.

The TOTAL company of France started work on Sirri-A and Sirri-E fields in July 1995 for a 48 months period.

Sirri-A oil field is to yield output from January 1998, while Sirri-E from January 1999.

He said that his company would in a joint venture with foreign companies exploit Soroush' and Balal oil fields, which have a reserve of 470 million barrels and 78 million barrels of oil respectively.

Inflation Under Control

Tehran Times Service

TEHRAN - Adoption of contractional policies by banks has checked rate of inflation in Iran and increased bank's liquidity.

Assadollah Monajemi, Director General of the Economic Statistics Department of the Central Bank of Iran added here Tuesday that the inflation rate plunged from 50 percent to 25.8 percent during the first eight months of the current Iranian year which began March 20 as compared to the same period last year, IRNA reported.

He said that Iran's methods and yardsticks determining the rate of inflation have been confirmed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

IMF has also requested Iran to assist it in determining the rate of inflation in some countries, he concluded.

Georgia Wants Iran to Be More Active in Its Consumer Markets

Tehran Times Service

TEHRAN - Iranian and Georgian heads of the chambers of commerce Ali-Naqi Khamoushi and Guram Akhvlediani in their meeting Wednesday exchanged views on the two countries' promotion of economic and commerce bilateral cooperation.

Khamoushi taking into account the formation of Irano-Georgian Joint Chamber of Commerce emphasized on trade exchange through the two countries' chambers of commerce, in the sectors of electromotor industry, technology and supply of consumer goods such as foodstuff and clothings, IRNA reported.

Akhvlediani referring to the saturation of Turkish commodities in the Georgian markets called for Islamic Republic of Iran to take an active part in the markets of his country.

The Georgian official expressed keeness on further promotion of Irano-Georgian bilateral relations in trade sector particularly in the oil industry.

Iranian Diplomat Meets Turkmen Official

Tehran Times Service

TEHRAN - Iranian Ambassador to Ashkhabad Seyed Mehdi Mir-Aboutalebi in separate meetings with Turkmen Vice-President for Oil and Gas Affairs Sarajayev and Foreign Minister and Vice-President in Charge of Government Affairs Boris Sheikhmoratov on Wednesday discussed progress in laying gas pipelines for transfer of the republic's gas to Iran.

They also arrange plans for visit to Iran of a Turkmen delegation with an aim to follow up implementation of the accord previously inked in the fields of oil and gas. The follow up would expedite the laying pipelines for transfer of Turkmen gas to Europe and the oil session at the minisstelrial level of Iran, Turkmenistan and Turkey in Tehran on December 28-29, IRNA reported.

Turkmen Vice-President Sarajayev, Oil and Industry Minister Oil and Gas Minister Tajanov and Deputy Oil Company Valiev are to arrive in Tehran on Friday at an invitation by Oil Minister Gholamreza Aqazadeh in order to take part at the tripartite meeting.

Turkmenistan is to export eight billion cubic meters of gas to Iran annually through a 200-km gas pipeplines whose construction was started in November.

Yet in another meeting, Miraboutalebi and Sheikhmoratov held talks on important regional issues, including conclusion of Tajikistan peace treaty and outcomes of president Rafsanjani's last week visit to Turkey.

Iran Ready to Offer Specialized Services to Libya

Tehran Times Service

TEHRAN - Industries Minister Mohammad-Reza Nematzadeh said in a meeting with Libyan Prime Minister Abd al-Majid al-Qaoud on Wedenesday that the Islamic Republic of Iran is ready to transfer its know-how's to Libya.

Nematzadeh, underlining the need for further expansion of Tehran- Triploli cooperation, said that besides concluding a contract with a Libyan company for the construction of a cement factory, agreements had been reached with Libya for the establishment of a joint Irano-Libya engineering company, IRNA reported.

He expressed hope that the establishment of the company would be important in the promotion of mutual economic and industrial cooperation.

Nematztheadeh invited Al-Qaoud on behalf of First Vice-President Hassan Habibi to pay an official visit to Tehran.

The Libyan prime minister said on his part that sincere' ties between Iran and Libya would pave a suitable ground for further promotion of mutual cooperation.

He said that formation of Tehran-Tripoli Joint Economic Commission session would pave the ground for improvement of mutual cooperation.

Al-Qaoud called for further activation of the commission and expansion of bilateral ties in the fields of industry, mines, banking, commerce and housing.

He added that bolstering of ties among Muslim states, which are capable of resolving their own problems in light of Islam had been the cause for fueling up the wrath of the world arrogance and the U.S.

Romania Proposes Transport Cooperation With Iran

Tehrain Times Service

TEHRAN - New Romanian Minister of Transportation, Traian Basescu, Tuesday in Bucharest voiced his country's readiness to cooperate with Iran in the field of transportation.

Making the remark in a meeting with Iran's Ambassador to Bucharest, Mohammad Reza Morshedzadeh, Basescu expressed hope that agreements on air transportation and commercial navigation will be signed between the two countries in the near future, IRNA reported.

The Romanian minister also proposed a meeting of transport experts of Iran and Romania and said that his country is ready to lease and manufacture locomotives and also establish cooperation in rail transportation with Iran.

Referring to agreements reached between Iran and Romania at the 11th session of Tehran-Bucharest Joint Economic Conmmission, Morshedzadeh called for acceleration of implementation of the articles of the accords.

Iran Prepared to Help Romania in Road Construction

Tehran Times Service

TEHRAN - The new Romanian Minister of Transport Teranian Basescu in a meeting in Bucharest on Tuesday with the Iranian Ambassador to Romania Mohammad-Reza Morshed-Zadeh, announced his country's readiness to carry out a joint venture with Islamic Iran in the areas of ship and aircraft building as well as cooperate in the removal of existing obstacles in the way of road transportation between the two nations.

He also expressed hope that Iran-Romania agreements on air and marine transportation would be finalized in a near future, IRNA reported.

Basescu said that his country was ready to further promote railroad transportation cooperation with Islamic Iran, tranfer of technology in the manufacture of locomotives and in the renting of train engines.

Iran, Armenia for Broadening Cooperation

By Soraya Dezhbankhan

EREVAN, Armenia — Experts committees of Iran and Armenia prepare agreements on Tehran-Yerevan cooperation in tourism, industry, trade, banking, energy and petrochemy, at was announced here Wednesday night, during the first joint session of the two contries' expert committees.

Some 12 committees will explore new avenves for further cooperation and coordination of the policies of the two countries in various areas including transportation, telecommunication, mines as well as cultural and scientific fields, during the Iranian delegation's visit to Armenia.

After being finalized, the agreements will take the seal of approual by the two countries' officials today.

Iranian Minister of Finance and Economic Affairs Morteza Mohammad Khan heads the Iranian experts delegation.

Iran and Georgia Sign Cooperation Document

Tehran Times Service

TEHRAN - Georgian Minister of Foriegn Trade and Economic Relations Konstantine Zaldastanishvili and Iran's Minister of Economy and Finanace Morteza Mohammadkhan signed an agreement on Tuesday to promote bilateral cooperation in trade and economic areas.

The two sides also signed seven memoranda of understanding (MOU) in the areas of tourism, transportation, energy and mine, on supply of high-capacity electromotors to the Iranian company Motozhen, supply of small-size tractors, cooperation between the two countries' chambers of commerce, and on housing and construction materials, IRNA reported.

The inking of the documents by the ministers and heads of the Irano-Georgian Joint Commission at the end of the visit to Iran by the Georgian State Minister Nikolos Lekishvili has been assessed important in promoting the bilateral ties.

Libyan Premier Underlines Excellent Iran-Libya Ties

Tehran Times Service

TEHRAN - In a meeting on Wednesday with visiting Iranian Minister of Industries Mohammad Reza Ne'matzadeh, the Libyan Premier Abdal-Majid Qa'oud referring to excellent bilateral relations noted that there is a proper ground for further consolidation of cooperation between the two countries.

The Libyan prime minister also called for further activation of the joint commission of the two countries in expanding ties in the fields of industry, mining, banking, trade and construction projects, IRNA reported.

The Libyan official said expansion of ties among Muslim countries which prepare the ground for solving their problems in light of Islamic teachings, annoys the world arrogance. He stressed that the Muslims should take greater steps in this direction and thwart enemy's plots.

The Iranian minister for his part underlined the necessity of promotion of ties between Iran and Libya and announced readiness of Iranain experts to transfer their know-how to their Libyan counterparts.

The Iranian Minister of Industries Ne'matzadeh referring to recent agreement on construction of a cement factory in Libya by Iranain experts, told reporters after the meeting that the two sides have agreed on setting up a joint engineering company which is expected to contribute to expansion of bilateral economic relations.

The Iranian minister in the meeting aslo conveyed a message from Iranian First Vice President Hassan Habibi iniviting him to visit Iran.

Iran to Set Up a Cement Plant in Libya

Tehran Times Service

TEHRAN - Iran is to set up a cement plant in Zeleiten of Libya based on a contract concluded between managing director of Iran's Industry Establishment Company and director of Libyan Cement Company in Libya on Wednesday.

Based on the contracts, which was signed in presence of Iranian Industries Minister Mohammad-Reza Nematzadeh and his Libyan counterpart Azouz, the company would run with a daily capacity of 3,200 tons of cement withing 34 months, IRNA reported.

Lauding Iran's expertise in technical and industrial fields, Azouz said at the meeting that the contract could be a prelude to a long-term cooperation between Iran and Libya.

Nematzadeh said on his part that establishment of the plant would serve as an important step in the expansion of Tehran-Tripoli cooperation in industrial and technical spheres.

Domestic Motion Pictures at a Glance

The Enemy

Tehran Times Service

TEHRAN — No other art has ever stood its real stand among the nations worldwide as the seventh art, the cinema. Due to its popularity from the very beginning of its birth, the cinema has had and is having its great impact on the culture of human society.

Still surprising is the fact that cinema movies are among the most effective and everlasting works of art.

A glance at the achievements of the Iranian cinema specially during the years after the revolution, will single out many important points: that we have done less to picture the culture of Iran and revolution; that we have been copying Western movies; that filmmaking has been and is very easy in Iran; that some film directors cannot return the loans they have been granted; that we see occasional bad box offices; that we had a sharp growth in quantity rather than quality of our productions; that ...

What is clear enough, is the fact that responsible authorities of motion pictures are not paying due attention to the rich and ancient culture of Iran. This has, in turn, impeded the Iranian cinema from doing its crucial responsibility, which is nothing other than fulfilling cultural ends.

While our national literature is enriched with novice humane stories, the Iranian cinema is entrapped into mundane and unattractive screenplays. Our national cinema should put forward the daily affairs of life in the best style possible to make them palpable for the public.

Nowadays, however, filmmaking has become epidemic among those who know more or less what a 'movie' is. You have money? Then go ahead, no matter what you make.

In no other country in the world, neither advanced nor developing, making 35 mm films is not as easy as Iran. In no other country entering the world of professional filmmakers (those who earn living by making films) is not this much easy.

The only positive point, meanwhile, may be for some who materialize their whishes. But this very positive fact brings about irreparable consequences for the cinematic society.

A couple of non-professional *non-amateur filmmakers* who do not know much about film and filmmaking have stepped in, whose productions can neither attract moviegoers nor do anything for the improvement of the ailing film industry of the country. What will the consequences be in the long run: hatred, disappointment, and untrustfulness of people and filmmakers to the cinema and cinematic works.

Day by day we witness bad box office returns— *Maah-e Mahraban* (Gentle Moon), *Sokoot-e Kouhestan* (Silence of the Mountains), *Yahya, Doshman* (The Enemy), etc. are clear examples. Box office records reveal only one or two good movies in a year—*Khaharan-e Ghareeb* (Sisters But Strangers), *Ghazaal*, etc.

This is a real higgledy-piggledy situation our cinema is struggling with. The weakness in financial sector is more outstanding.

Of course, according to some reports, one of the top responsible authorities in the film industry has given good words of the loans to be granted to eligible filmmakers. Let us take it for granted and wait for the bright future in the industry.

Answerable, however, are those fame-seekers who step in the industry, thus ring the first danger bell for Iranian cinema.

If there were specialized filters to scan filmmakers, directors, etc. we could ameliorate more or less the present hodgepodge. In other words, we need filmmakers and film directors who know *what* film and cinema is; who have technical know-how in the field; and who regard cinema as a sacred means for reflecting and introducing Iranian culture.



Silence of the Mountain



Gentle Moon

Museum Conserves Ancient Egyptian Tomb Before Nationwide Tour

PHILADELPHIA — When he commissioned construction of his tomb some 4,300 years ago, complete with intricate carvings and paintings, a high-level Egyptian bureaucrat named Kapure aimed for immortality.

It worked, but maybe not quite in the way the overseer of the treasury had imagined.

Kapure's chapel, the public area of the limestone tomb where visitors would pray and leave offerings, is being lovingly conserved at the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology — its home for more than 90 years.

One wall of the chapel, including 30 stone blocks and a false door that weighs more than five tons, will be the centerpiece of a nationwide tour of 138 Egyptian artifacts planned by the museum.

The tomb of Kapure (pronounced *ka-pooh-rah*) was discovered in the late 19th century in the ancient Egyptian cemetery of Saqqara, about 12 1-2 miles (20 kilometers) south of Cairo. The chapel was excavated in 1903 and sent to the United States the following year by the Egyptian government for display at the St. Louis exposition.

The burial chamber, which was behind the false door and where Kapure's mummy was interred, was never disturbed and he likely remains in the Egyptian cemetery to this day, said Dr. David Silverman, curator of the museum's Egyptian section.

After the world's fair, the chapel was purchased by John Wanamaker, a Philadelphia department store tycoon, and moved to the museum. But it sat in crates until 1926, when it was finally put together and put on display.

The tomb remained open to the public until 1981, when the elements and vandalism began to take their toll and the exhibit was closed, said museum conservator Lynn Grant.

"People were in the habit of leaving us little souvenirs," she said, pointing to two names scratched in the ancient rock.

In addition, all of the weight of the upper blocks is resting on the lower blocks and causing compressive damage, stress fractures and disintegration. There are approximately 120 blocks in the chapel: the largest is the 11,220-pound (5,100-kilogram) door and the smallest is about 150 pounds (70 kilograms).

And the natural salt in the stone is causing it to crumble.

"Philadelphia has very humid summers and dry winters (and) the salts have been crystallizing serially every winter and pushing the surface off," she said. "In some places, if you just touch (the stone) it disintegrates into sand. That's also what's causing the loss of the paint." Conservators want to see if they can remove the salts, which can be a difficult process. Normally, that is done by soaking the object in purified water to draw them out.

But limestone is problematic because of its natural composition, so a company in Westport, Connecticut, that specializes in conserving monumental stone is considering various methods to stabilize it, Grant said. One wall of the chapel has been disassembled and moved to conservation technical associates' lab in Connecticut. There, the wall is to be conserved and a new framework will be built.

Late next summer, the conserved chapel section will be shipped to the Dallas Museum of Art for the "searching for ancient Egypt" exhibition, scheduled to open Sept. 28. After its run in Dallas, the exhibit will travel to Denver, Seattle, Omaha, Nebraska, Toledo, Ohio, and Birmingham, Alabama, before returning to Philadelphia in 2000.

The rest of the chapel will be conserved as soon as funding is available, but probably won't be back on full display until the fall of 2000, Grant said.

Kapure's tomb chapel, about 12 feet by 5 feet (4 meters by 1.5 meters), was "the high-economy model" of the time, Silverman said. From the Pharaohs to the common man, the way and place you were buried was important to your position in the afterlife. The kings had their pyramids, and then everyone else would be buried in hierarchal order in tombs surrounding the pyramids, he explained.

Kapure's tomb was built about 800 years before the reign of King Tut.

The carvings and hieroglyphics in Kapure's tomb chapel show his name, titles, some prayers and many instructions for assisting his *ka*, or inner spirits.

Some of the hieroglyphics show Kapure requesting 1,000 containers of alabaster, 1,000 of fine linen and 1,000 loaves of bread. Yet another shows a figure *butchering an animal, asking for* the liver and the spleen.

Grant said she'll be sad to see the tomb leave, but knows that conservation will help keep it - and Kapure's legacy - around for another 4,000 years.

(AP)

UAE Marriage Fund to Finance 220 New Weddings

ABU DHABI — The United Arab Emirates (UAE) State Marriage Fund has approved grants for 220 local men lining up for assistance to meet soaring wedding costs, the semi-official daily *Al-Ittihad* said on Thursday.

The fund, created by UAE President Sheikh Zayed Ibn Sultan al-Nahayan five years ago, approved 15.4 million dirhams ($4.19 million) for the would-be bridegrooms after they met its conditions, the paper quoted the fund's director general, Jamal al-Bih, as saying.

The fund grants up to 70,000 dirhams ($19,073) to an applicant provided he is a UAE national marrying a UAE woman.

It has a capital of 250 million dirhams ($68 million) but is planning to boost resources to face growing demand, fund officials said.

The fund, which gets its allocations from the annual federal budget, was established with the aim of encouraging local men to marry native women by helping them in meeting high dowries, the money paid by bridegrooms to their brides under Islamic law. Dowries in the UAE and other oil-rich Persian Gulf states can exceed 100,000 dollars.

(AFP)



On Action

Better to reign in hell than serve in heaven.

JOHN MILTON, *Paradise Lost*

France Sets May Deadline to Privatize TV Production House

PARIS — The French government intends to privatize its SFP Audio-Visual Production House by mid-May after giving it a cash injection of 1.2 billion francs ($231 million), Culture Minister Philippe Douste-Blazy said Thursday.

With the new dose of cash, the Societe Francaise de Production will have cost French taxpayers 3.4 billion francs ($653 million) since 1990, the minister said.

The government said on Tuesday that it favored a joint offer from two French groups, Havas and Generale des Eaux, to acquire SFP, the privatization of which has been repeatedly stalled since the process began in July.

Given the two groups' television know-how — both are shareholders in the French pay-TV channel Canal Plus — their bid represented the best prospects for the future for SFP and its 1,000-odd employees.

SFP, which makes about 1,700 hours of programming for public and private networks, has a yearly revenue of about 900 million francs.

Since 1985 it has been running at a loss, costing the state 2.2 billion francs so far.

(AFP)



SPORTS SUMMARY

Tehran Times Service

FOOTBALL

Unhappy Return for Shearer

LONDON: World record striker Alan Shearer had an unhappy return to former club Blackburn as his faltering Newcastle side lost 1-0 at Ewood Park to leave Kevin Keegan's men without a win in seven matches.

Blackburn, who broke the magpies' hearts late last season when they won the fixture 2-1 and effectively ended Newcastle's title hopes, grabbed the points with a Kevin Gallacher goal a quarter of an hour from the end.

Leaders Liverpool could only draw 1-1 at home to Leicester, although second-placed Arsenal could only draw at Sheffield Wednesday. Meanwhile, champions Manchester United crushed Nottingham Forest 4-0 at the city ground, seven-million-pound striker andy cole returning from injury to hit the fourth.

Middlebrough beat everton 4-2 helped by a brace from brazilian maestro juninho, while coventry beat leeds 3-1 at elland road.

Aston Villa meanwhile failed to record their sixth straight win as they crashed 2-0 at home to Chelsea.

Hinchcliffe Out for Season

LONDON: England's World Cup qualification hopes suffered a major setback with the news that Everton midfielder Andy Hinchcliffe will Miss the rest of the season with knee ligament damage.

The 27-year-old Hinchliffe, who made his England debut in the 3-0 win in Moldova and kept his place for the wins over Poland and Georgia, damaged his knee during Everton's goalless draw with Leeds on Saturday.

Rangers Streak Clear

GLASGOW: Rangers showed no let up in their charge to a record-equaling ninth successive league title with a 4-0 demolition of Raith Rovers.

Captain Richard Gough, England star Paul Gascoigne, German midfielder Jorg Albertz and goal-machine Ally McCoist were the goalscorers as Rangers brushed aside Rovers with embarrassing ease to go 17 points clear.

Karembeu Transfer Saga Continues

MADRID: Real Madrid are still not certain of clinching the transfer of Sampdoria's French international Christian Karembeu, although he will play with his current side in a friendly at the Bernabeu Stadium on Sunday, a Real official said.

He said the Italian delegation would travel straight home after the match and there would be no time for negotiations.

Real have been putting together a bid for stylish midfielder Karembeu, 25, since the start of the season and he has agreed to join them, although rivals Barcelona have also bid for his services.

TENNIS

Graf Out of Hopman Cup

BRUEHL: World number one Steffi Graf has pulled out of next week's Hopman Cup in Perth because of a virus, her manager Hans Engert said.

But Engert said Graf would be fit to play in the Australian Open in Melbourne which begins on January 13.

CRICKET

Dismal England Put Zimbabwe in Control

HARARE: A dismal England batting display allowed Zimbabwe to take a stranglehold of the second test here.

When bad light stopped play 48 minutes early England were tottering on 137-9, just 10 runs short of the previous lowest score of 147 made by Pakistan against Zimbabwe in tests in 1993.

England, who lost three wickets in each session, did much to undermine their own cause with an abject poor batting performance.

All nine batsmen contributed to their own downfall and only John Crawley, with a fighting unbeaten 37 off 133 balls in nearly three hours, played an innings of substance.

Prasad Spearhead's Indian Broadside

DURBAN: The first day of the first test between South Africa and India belonged to the tourists — more especially paceman Venkateash Prasad.

At the close, India had weathered two obligatory overs for two without loss after Prasad's five wicket haul provided the spearhead which had the home side all out for 235.

Prasad and his new ball partner Javagal Srinath proved more than a handful for the South Africans on a well-grassed kingsmead track, Prasad ending with 5-60 and Srinath with 2-36.

Embarrassment for Pakistan

BRISBANEF: Pakistan's cricket tour of Australia lurched into further crisis with another one-day mauling, this time by Sheffield shield leaders Queensland.

The Pakistanis, seeking match practice in the lead-up to their New Year's day limited-over international with Australia in Sydney, crashed to a 63-run defeat.

Chasing 187 to win, Pakistan were bowled out for 123 in the 39th over.

Pakistan's defeat comes five days after their abysmal innings defeat to Tasmania when they were bundled out for 67 in their second innings.

RUGBY

Muller Set for Toulouse Debut

PARIS: South Africa's Pieter Muller is set to make his debut for Toulouse against Paris University club in the French cup on Sunday following his move from the Australian Super League.

Muller, recruited last month, has also been given the green light to play in the second half of the league season by the French federation.

Manchester United Wins 4-0 at Forest, Liverpool Held at Home

LONDON — Manchester United jumped to third in the English soccer standings Thursday after scoring a 4-0 victory at last place Nottingham Forest while leader Liverpool was held 1-1 at home by modest Leicester.

Andy Cole, back in action after breaking two bones in his leg, scored United's fourth at the city ground where David Beckham, Nicky Butt and Ole Gunnar Solskjaer also hit the back of the Forest net.

The reds, who scored a 5-0 victory over Sunderland Saturday, have netted nine without reply in their last two league games. The results mean they now have 34 points from 19 games and have a match in hand on Liverpool, which has 39.

Liverpool fell behind to Leicester at Anfield where Steve Claridge gave the visitor the lead but Stan Collymore equalized 10 minutes from the end. Top scorer Robbie Fowler pulled out of the Liverpool lineup after picking up an ankle injury just before kickoff.

Second place Arsenal had the chance to cut Liverpool's lead to one point by beating mid-standings Sheffield Wednesday at Hillsborough later Thursday.

One-time leader Newcastle slipped further out of contention after losing 1-0 at lowly Blackburn, where Kevin Gallacher scored the only goal 15 minutes from the end. Newcastle now is sixth and eight points behind the leader.

Gianfranco Zola scored both goals as Chelsea ended Aston Villa's run of five wins in a row in a 2-0 victory at Villa Park. Chelsea also is eight points off the lead but now has won two in a row after five without a win.

Brazilian star Juninho scored twice on his return to the Middlesbrough lineup after injury as Bryan Robson's team scored its first win in 13 league games with a 4-2 beating of Everton.

More grim news for Everton was that England international Andy Hinchcliffe had been ruled out for the rest of the season because of knee ligament damage.

Leeds' run of five games without conceding a goal ended dramatically with a 3-1 loss at home to lowly Coventry.

After Brian Deane had put Leeds ahead, Coventry hit back to score through Darren Huckerby, Dion Dublin and Gary McAllister's penalty. Leeds also had a spot kick but sky blues veteran 'keeper Steve Ogrizovic saved it.

Steffen Iversen, a 2.6-million-pound ($ 4.2 million) transfer from Eurpopean Champions Cup quarterfinalist Rosenborg scored his first two goals for Tottenham in a 3-1 victory over Southampton at White Hart Lane.

Late goals by Richard Ord and Craig Russell gave Sunderland a 2-0 victory over Derby.

Bolton returned to the top of division one with a 2-1 victory at last place Grimsby while Barnsley tumbled 1-0 at Stoke.

Scottish titlist Rangers scored a 4-0 victory over Raith with goals from Richard Gough, Paul Gascoigne, Jorg Albertz and Ally McCoist.

That put Walter Smith's team 17 points clear although second place Celtic had the opportunity to cut that to 14 later Thursday by winning at third place Aberdeen. Even then, Celtic still has two more games in hand. *(AP)*

Surgery for Hornets Forward Burrell

CHARLOTTE, North Carolina — Charlotte Hornets forward Scott Burrell will undergo arthroscopic surgery Friday to repair torn cartilage in his right knee and is expected to miss the next six to eight weeks.

Burrell suffered the injury on Sunday in Boston. The procedure will be performed by team doctor Glenn Perry at the Carolinas Medical Center.

The 25-year-old Burrell is averaging 5.2 points and 2.8 rebounds in 25 games this season. He missed the final 52 games last season due to a dislocated right shoulder and the last 13 in 1994-95 because of a partially torn right achilles tendon.

"This is a tough setback for Scott because he had worked so hard to get back and was starting to get his timing back and feel comfortable on the floor," said Hornets Coach Dave Cowens. "I know from his previous injuries he will work hard during rehab and make a big contribution to our team in the second half of the season. *(AFP)*

Spanish Clubs Set for Fresh Spending Spree

MADRID — After spending a national record 300 billion pesetas on players over the summer, Spanish clubs are set to splash out nearly half as much again on reinforcements now the country's transfer market has reopened.

Under league rules, players with less than five games to their credit can change team in the month from December 15. And the wealth of talent at the big sides means that the men available for transfer could themselves form an all-star lineup.

The top three teams in the league alone have four goalkeepers with caps for their countries sidelined and ready to move on.

Some sides have already bought foreign players, but are yet to incorporate them. John Toshack hopes that Deportivo Coruna's lack of bite in front of goal will be ended by Renaldo, whose transfer from Atletico Mineiro was agreed several months ago.

The Brazilian striker — who has excited interest from Italian sides — arrives at Deportivo together with three other foreigners who have cost 2.15 billion pesetas (15.5 million).

The surfeit of stars at the club has already produced complaints from expensive signings who feel they are not playing enough, and the problems are bound to increase.

Several players will have to move on to allow space in the squad for the new arrivals, as Spanish teams have a limit of 25 first team squad-members.

Real Madrid are faced by an excess of talent between the posts.

After nearly a decade holding down the number one shirt at the Bernabeu Stadium, veteran Paco Buyo looked likely to cede his place to Spanish international substitute Santiago Canizares.

However both men have had to play second fiddle this season to newly signed former German international Bodo Illgner.

Barcelona's own goalkeeping crisis was one of quantity rather than quality until Vitor Baia joined the club in the close-season.

Baia's hold over the first-team place has left reserve keeper Carlos Busquets and former Spanish international Julen Lopetegui wondering where their future lies. A fourth keeper, Mariano Angoy, gave up the fight earlier this season and now plays as a kicker for an American football team.

Barcelona's free-spending summer has left a number of players in other positions ready to move on from the Camp Nou.

Croatian midfiedler Robert Prosinecki was tired of struggling even to make the substitutes' bench, and has moved to Sevilla for an estimated 300 pesetas (2.3 million).

But Barcelona are buying as well as selling.

Nigerian winger Emanuel Amunike has arrived from Sporting Lisbon, and the Catalan club continues to pursue Sampdoria's Christian Karembeu, despite assurances from the French midfielder that he wants to go to Real Madrid.

Meanwhile news of offers from other clubs has prompted Barcelona to double Ronaldo's salary and anchor the brilliant young Brazilian with a new multibillion Peseta contract.

Anyone now wanting to buy the entire Barcelona squad would be contractually bound to pay fifty billion pesetas.

Even Real Madrid's star-studded lineup can't match that.

But Real are continuing to look for talent in Brazil, and right-back Cesar Prates of Internacional de Porto Alegre is a likely signing in the near future. *(Reuter)*

Japan Chooses 10 Sites for 2002 World Cup

TOKYO — Four Japanese cities and six prefectures (states) received a Christmas present Wednesday from the nation's soccer governing body — news that they will be hosts for 2002 World Cup Games.

Japan is sharing the host role for the 2002 World Cup, the first to be held in Asia, with South Korea. Each is to have 32 of the final round games, and FIFA, soccer's world governing body, told each to prepare at least six stadiums and at most 10.

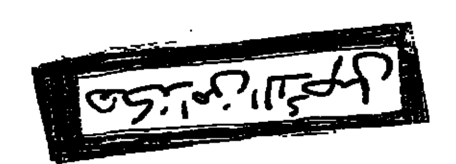
Keita Yamashita, a spokesman of the Japan Football Association, said its 22-member Executive Committee decided to stage games in the cities of Sapporo, Yokohama, Osaka and Kobe and the prefectures of Miyagi, Ibaraki, Saitama, Niigata, Shizuoka and Oita.

Kobe was devastated by an earthquake in January 1995 that killed more than 6,000 people. Sapporo was host to the 1972 Winter Olympics.

In decisions aimed in part at ensuring regional balance, the cities of Kyoto and Hiroshima and the prefectures of Aomori, Chiba and Aichi failed in their bids, Yamashita said.

Fifa has specified that each stadium must accommodate more than 40,000 spectators. The semi-finals and finals will be held at a stadium that can hold more than 60,000.

The opening ceremony is to be staged in South Korea, and the final match and closing ceremony are to be held in Japan, but the host city for the final has yet to be named. *(AP)*





TEHRAN (Dec. 25) — President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani receives members of the Headquarters for Illiteracy Campaign.

Netanyahu Not Giving Back Golan

BAIT-UL-MOQADDAS — Syria has signaled that it is ready to resume peace talks with Israel at the end of next month, Israel radio reported Friday.

Syrian Foreign Minister Farouk al-Shaara told French President Jacques Chirac during a visit to Paris last week that Damascus was willing to resume negotiations, the report said.

Israeli-Syrian peace talks broke down early this year. Syria demands that Israel return all of the Golan Heights, the strategic plateau it captured in the 1967 Mideast war and later annexed.

Israel's hardline Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, has said he would consider some territorial compromise in exchange for peace, but not give back all of the plateau. (AP)

Egypt Opposes Arms Embargo on Sudan

CAIRO — Egypt opposes an arms embargo on Sudan's government because it would benefit secessionist rebels in southern Sudan, a senior Egyptian official as reported Thursday as saying.

"In spite of our opposition to the policies of the Sudanese regime, we reject the imposition of an arms embargo on Sudan because such an embargo would deprive the government of arms but would not block the provision of arms to southern secessionists," Osama al-Baz, advisor to Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, was quoted by the MENA news agency as saying.

Baz, who spoke Thursday night at a gathering organized by Giza Province, was referring to the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), headed by John Garang, which has been fighting Khartoum since 1983 for the right of self-determination for the south of the country, which is predominantly Christian and animist.

The United Nations imposed diplomatic sanctions on Sudan in May for not extraditing three Egyptian activists to Ethiopia after an assassination attempt there against Mubarak in 1995. (AFP)

Lebed Launches Political Crusade With New Russian Party

MOSCOW — Tough-talking former army General Alexander Lebed launched an offensive against the Kremlin Friday by rallying his political troops to form a party he hopes will propel him to the presidency.

Some 146 delegates from movements which support Lebed gathered in Golitisino, west of Moscow, to formally announce the setting up of the Russian Republican People's Party (RRPP).

"We shall unite those who share our convictions and are disappointed both in the communists and in the democrats," Lebed said in an interview Friday with the daily *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*.

The new grouping was clearly expected to aid Lebed, who has practically sunk into oblivion since October after enjoying a political high as head of Russia's powerful Security Council and chief mediator in the Chechen conflict.

Earlier this year the former general forced media and political attention when he came third in the first round of June presidential polls and later concluded a landmark peace agreement with Chechens in August.

But his abrasive, loose-cannon style and openly stated ambition to succeed Boris Yeltsin as Russian president earned him few allies within the Kremlin. In October he was openly disavowed by Yeltsin and sacked from his post. (AFP)

3 Firebombs Tossed at Soldiers

AL-KHALIL, West Bank — Palestinians threw three firebombs at soldiers guarding a Jewish enclave in Al-Khalil on Friday, causing no injuries or damage in the fourth such incident in four days, witnesses said.

Soldiers rounded up about 15 Palestinian men for questioning following the attack, which coincided with ongoing negotiations over Israel's delayed hand over of this West Bank city to Palestinian rule, the witnesses said.

Incidents involving Al-Khalil's 400 zealous Jewish settlers and 120,000 Arab residents have escalated since negotiations on the transfer of power in the city accelerated earlier this week with a summit meeting between Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian President Yasser Arafat. (AFP)

(Contd from Pg. 1)

ARAFAT...

it a meeting with the prime minister to finish things," Palestinian Security Chief Jabril Rajoub told journalists.

Rajoub made the comments after meeting Netanyahu in Bait-ul-Moqaddas with other Palestinian security negotiators to work out remaining issues in the talks on the handover of Al-Khalil, the last West Bank city still under Israeli occupation.

Netanyahu advisor Danny Naveh did not confirm the meeting with Arafat. "This was a good meeting. There will be other meetings at a higher level, but there are no dates set," he said after the talks.

Rajoub said the two sides were "very close to reaching an agreement" on the Al-Khalil redeployment. "I think we will conclude during the next week," he said.

Israel and the Palestinians have held almost three months of grueling talks to find a formula to allow an Israeli troop withdraw in Al-Khalil, after Netanyahu demanded stronger security guarantees for 400 Jewish settlers living in the city. (AFP)

(Contd from Pg. 1)

ARMENIA...

Iranian Minister of Finance and Economic Affairs Morteza Mohammad Khan, Deputy Foreign Minister for Euro-American Affairs Mahmoud Vaezi, and Deputy Oil Minister Rahgozar accompanied Habibi on his visit.

(Contd from Pg. 1)

YELTSIN...

quoted Yeltsin as saying.

Russian officials have said Li's trip is aimed mainly at paving the way for a planned visit by Chinese President Jiang Zemin in 1997.

Beijing's official Xinhua news agency said on Friday that China, Russia and three other former Soviet republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have reached a comprehensive accord on reducing forces along their borders.

Xinhua said the agreement was reached in Beijing but gave no details about the timing or extent of troop reductions and did not say when a formal pact would be signed.

Chernomyrdin was also due to meet Li on Friday and was expected to arrange to hold regular talks with the Chinese premier, setting up the level of relations that Moscow now has with only the United States and France.

Yeltsin, who underwent quintuple heart bypass surgery in November and returned to work on Monday, has said more than once that he seeks a strategic partnership between Russia and China.

But Yeltsin has ruled a revival of the close political and military alliance that had existed between Moscow and Beijing in 1950s and degenerated in the mid-1960s into two decades of bitter rivalry for leadership in the communist world.

Russia's desire to develop close links with China has followed NATO's plans to expand eastwards by admitting Moscow's Cold War allies in eastern Europe as members of the alliance.

Russia also views China as a key trading partner and both countries have shown interest in upgrading economic ties which have failed to keep pace with an improvement in political links.

China and Russia are working on a plan to increase cross-border trade by setting up a special zone in the northeastern Chinese city of Suifenhe that would allow free movement for traders.

The two nations are also negotiating over major deals from nuclear power plants to a natural gas pipeline, but political analysts said Li's visit was unlikely to yield a breakthrough.

Russia has proposed building a pipeline to carry Siberian natural gas to China and is seeking a role in China's huge Three Gorges Dam project. It is also keen to sell military and civil aircraft to China.

First Deupty Prime Minister Alexei Bolshakov, quoted by Interfax news agency, said Russia and China planned to sign several documents during Li's visit concerning planned sales of Russia's SU-27 fighters. He gave no details. (Reuter)

(Contd from Pg. 1)

OSCE...

mission to Belgrade, scene of daily anti-government protests, Gonzalez urged the Serbian authorities to respect the will of the people expressed at the ballot box.

Belgrade has witnessed five weeks of mass protests since the election results were cancelled.

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) had been called in by Milosevic to review the November 17 elections, and it had been expected to support opposition claims of ballot fraud.

In Belgrade, opposition leaders immediately called on Milosevic to accept the OSCE findings.

"If Milosevic refuses, he will bring discredit on our country and worsen the political crisis," Zoran Djindjic, a leading light in the Together Opposition Coalition said.

Last week Yugoslav Foreign Minister Milan Milutinovic said the elections could be rescheduled if the OSCE found new evidence of fraud.

But the authorities have since taken a harder line, after a pro-government rally on Tuesday was dwarfed by a rival opposition protest.

Prior to presenting his findings to OSCE chief Flavio Cotti, Gonzalez, a former Spanish prime minister, said: "I am by nature optimistic, but the problem is complex." (AFP)

(Contd from Pg. 1)

ISRAELI...

Shahor had also headed the civilian affairs committee in negotiations with the Palestinians on extending autonomy to the West Bank city of Al-Khlil but was suspended in November for having met privately with former Prime Minister Peres without having informed his superiors.

"General Shahor had waited for things to calm down a bit before leaving the army," spokesman Shlomo Dror told AFP. "He also wanted to wait for the negotiations on the army redeployment from Hebron, in which he had played a central role, to near completion," he said.

Mordechai issued a statement accepting the resignation "with regret" and praising Shahor for his 36 years of army service. (AFP)

(Contd from Pg. 1)

BAHRAINI...

The authorities then ordered Shia leaders to stop political preaching in the mosques after the resumption in late December 1995 of demonstrations prompted by the Shia opposition.

At the beginning of prayers on Friday, riot police attacked the faithful with rubber bullets and tear gas, and hundreds of people passed out, residents contacting from Nicosia said.

During the attack, Seyyed Jawad al-Wedai, one of the top Shia religious leaders, was manhandled by the police, residents said.

For the third Friday in a row, the authorities closed most of the Shia mosques, notably those of Al-Sadoq, in the Manama neighborhoood of Al-Quful, Karbabad, west of the capital, and Diraz, even farther west, were also closed, forcing Shia Muslims who wanted to attend prayers to go to Ras al-Roman, Manama's largest Shia mosque, which is near the British Embassy.

The mosques were closed to head off anti-government demonstrations as part of security measures taken ahead of the National Day, December 16. (AFP)

(Contd from Pg. 7)

HONORING...

So, experience and expression are supremely important to being well-connected with our inner life. It is not just an issue of dancing on the surface of our emotions and saying "Yes, I'm angry. Yes, I'm hurt". That is not being in contact with what you are feeling. You need to get in there and own it and take the responsibility for it, and not lie to yourself or anybody else about it, and not fake it with some kind of glib facile easy dismissal.

And just as we don't want to dismiss emotions we also don't want to dismiss thoughts. For example, you might be a happily married woman who sometimes feels: "There is something missing in my life." You don't want to think about that. It opens doors that might scare you a little bit. So you never get around to say: "Hey. Wait a minute. It doesn't mean I don't love my husband. It doesn't mean I am not happy. What might be missing. If I don't take the trouble to check out the thought, to go inside to look at it I would never discover the possible solutions that exist. And I can have the frustration that get worse and worse and in fact poisons my relationship when it didn't need to. Because I didn't take the time to say "Hay. Wait a minute. What is this? Let me look at this. Don't let me be quick to assume I'm being irrational or it's all a hallucination, or even if it is real, there are no answers?"

My experience as a psychotherapist is that, most of the time there *are* answers and there *are* solutions which people never get to, because they never stop long enough to look at thoughts that might at first glance appear troublesome or even threatening.

There is a kind of meditation that I myself practice a good deal and I recommend it to my clients in therapy and now I am recommending it to you as a way of life because it is a very good strategy for enhancing self-awareness and for connecting to the deeper levels of your own internal life. And it goes simply like this:

Sit quietly. Close your eyes. And begin to breathe deeply and gently through your mouth into your stomach, into your center. And for a minute or two just be aware of your breathing. And follow it, all the way in and all the way down, as you send to yourself, as you experience yourself. And begin to notice any thoughts that might float past your mind, any emotions that might arise in you, and follow your own breathing, and notice what comes up for you, what seems paramount, what seems dominant, — thoughts, images, memories, emotions. And on any particular day, you might be surprised, because you might just get pleasantly calmer, but you might suddenly find yourself with tears in your eyes, or, you might find yourself becoming a little angry or, you might find yourself becoming excited or, you might find yourself becoming unexpectedly euphoric or unexpectedly sad. And you don't want to run from any of that. You just want to experience it, and watch it. And breathe into it and get to know about all the emotional richness that you carry within yourself.

The self is a vast continent, that most people never explore. And one of the most interesting and fruitful ways to begin your exploration is to take just five minutes every day for this kind of meditation, this kind of journey into the 'Self'. And don't be in a hurry to draw conclusions from what you notice there or from what comes up from you. Tell yourself: "I am willing to see everything. I am willing to experience whatever there is to experience."

WEATHER

The Islamic Republic of Iran Meteorological Organization announced today's weather as follows:

Forecast for Tehran:

Max. temp. 19°C
Min. temp. 8°C

Partly cloudy with dust

Warmest Point:
Rasht 27°C

Coldest Point:
Koohrang -9°C

Some cities of the world

Cities	Max. °C	Cities	Max. °C
Riyadh	25	Vienna	-11
Istanbul	1	Moscow	-20
Rome	1	Madrid	5
Athens	–	Abu Dhabi	25
London	-1	Karachi	–
Paris	-3	New Delhi	20
Frankfurt	-8	Kuwait	23

Countries Showing Increasing Independence in the Face of U.S.



Photo: Abbas Takin

Tehran Times Service

TEHRAN – The Tehran substitute Friday prayer leader Ayatollah Emami kashani, addressing the worshipers on the campus of Tehran University here yesterday, noted that, today, the world countries are showing increasing independence and self-determination in the face of the United States and no longer submit to the Washington's pressures.

He added that, despite the mounting corruption, war and bloodshed in different parts of the world, the people are acquiring more understanding and awareness. The resistance of the people in the regional countries against the crimes of the Zionist regime and the U.S. pressures serves as an example of the people's political awareness, the ayatollah said, stressing that the Muslim nations do not allow the Zionists to continue with their aggressive policies in the occupied Palestine and no longer view the U.S. as a superpower.

Ayatollah Emami Kashani also touched on the President Hashemi Rafsanjani's recent visit to Turkey and the signing of significant accords by the two countries and also Russian Foreign Minister Yevgeni Primakov's visit to Tehan. He underlined that the world media regard the above important developments as slaps on the face of America.

The prayer leader further emphasized that, although the rate of crime committed by the arrogant powers is rising, the people are resisting the oppresssion and tyranny of the global arrogance. The disillusionment of the masses across the world with the Western civilization, he added, leads the people toward the right path and prepares them for the messianic return of Imam Mahdi (AS), the Twelfth Imam of the Infallible Household of the Holy Prophet (S).

Committee of Islamic Countries' Parliaments to Meet in Sudan

KHARTOUM -- The second meeting of the coordinating committee of Islamic Countries Parliamentary Union will be held in Sudan within two months.

This was announced here Tuesday by Iran's ambassador to Sudan, Mehdi Marvi, in a meeting with the head of the foreign department of the committee, Mohammad Shaker al-Saraj.

The first meeting of the committee was held in Tehran last month. (IRNA)

4. 2 Richter Earthquake Jolts Yasuj, South of Iran

YASUJ – A tremor measuring 4.2 degrees on open-ended richter jolted Yasuj and the nearby villages today at 12:47:42 hours local time (09:17:42 GMT) the seismographical base of the geophysics institute of Tehran University registered the epicentre of the tremor as 600 kms southwest of the capital, in the vicinity of Yasuj.

Yet no report on possible casualities or damage to properties was reported, said the officials in the provincial natural disaster headquarters at the office of the governor general of Kohkiluyeh and Boyerahamd. (IRNA)

Greek Press Positive to Iranian Mediation Offer

ATHENS – Commenting on Turkey's acceptance of an Iranian proposal to mediate between Athens and Ankara, Greek dailies on Tuesday said the recent visit of Iranian President Akbar Hashemi Rafasnajani to Ankara contributed to the change in Turkey's stance.

"Well-informed sources stress that the first contacts Tehran had with Ankara were not encouraging, but there was a change of climate during the visit of Iran's president to Turkey," noted the influential morning daily *Kathimerini*.

On Sunday, Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati said in Tehran that Ankara has welcomed Iran's mediation proposal to settle Turkey's dispute with Greece and Syria.

Velayati said a delegation will be dispatched to Athens in the near future to discuss the issue with Greek officials.

Greek radio and television stations gave wide coverage to the Iranian proposal.

An Iranian Embassy source in Athens told IRNA today that he had no information when the Iranian delegation would come to Greece.

However, the source, who spoke on condition of anonymity, speculated that Velayati himself would raise the mediation proposal with Greek officials during his visit to Athens in January.

Foreign ministers of Armenia, Georgia, Greece and Iran are to meet in Athens next month to promote regional cooperation for peace and stability.

Under a report entitled "Why Not?", mass-selling afternoon daily *Eleftherotypia* noted that Greek Foreign Minister Theodoros Pangalos had described the Iranian proposal to mediate between Greece and Turkey during his visit to Tehran last August as "positive." On Monday Greek government Spokesman Dimitris Reppas said, "If a delegation from Iran wants to visit Athens, Greece will listen to its views because there is no reason to reject any effort before the fact."

On the basis of our positions we are open to seeing what each initiative is, Reppas added.

Another afternoon paper, *Exousia*, said, "According to available information, Ankara at first reacted with special reservation to the mediation proposal, fearing Iran's 'partial' stance in favor of Greece, due to the good relations between the two countries which were strengthened during the Yugoslavia crisis, and verified by the recent trip of Theodoros Pangalos to Tehran." But Turkey's change of possition seems to indicate that it has received certain necessary guarantees from the Iranian government," Exousia added.

Greece and Turkey are at odds over differences on the seabed in the Aegean, the Cyprus problem, and minority issues. (IRNA)

Mohammadi Araqi: 40,000 Mosques to Be Dusted, Sprayed With Rose-Water

Tehran Times Service

TEHRAN – The head of Islamic Propagation Organization (IPO), Hojjatoleslam Mohammadi Araqi said that some 40,000 mosques across the country will be dusted and sprayed with rose-water in the period from Jan. 1-10, 1997 with the help of the people and the government authorities.

Making the above statement in an address to the worshippers at Friday prayers here yesterday, he added that in all provincial cities teams comprised of the people and government authorities have been formed to dust the mosques before beginning of the Muslim holy month of Ramazan, which commences on Jan. 11, 1997.

The hojjatoleslam further pointed out that mosques are centers for the dissemination of Islamic values and noted that some 20,000 preachers and clergymen are about to be appointed to the mosques which do not have pray leaders. He added that the IPO offices across the country are also ready to-appoint prayer leaders to mosques.

Tajik President Thanks Iran, Russia for Their Peace Efforts

DUSHANBE – Tajik President Imomali Rakhmanov here on Thursday thanked Iran and Russia for their mediation between Tajik belligerent sides, which led to conclusion of an agreement and a national reconciliation accord in the republic.

Rakhmanov, who was speaking to a group of Tajik sportsmen, said that it is high time to forgive and forget each other's faults, brush aside all the differences and as a national duty, try to fully support and build peace.

He said that December 23 is a historical day for Tajik nation, when the peace deal was signed. Consequently, this day should be honored.

He added that the nation was shouldering great responsibility to make peace work and that the countries around world were quite satisfied with the outcome of the peace treaty. (IRNA)

Muslims Worldwide Celebrate Imam Mahdi's (AS) Birth Anniversary

TEHRAN -- Muslims in Rome, Ashkhabad, Moscow, Kiev, Paris and Kuala Lumpur celebrated the 1,162nd birth annivesary of the last Imam of Prophet Mohammad's infallible household Hazrat Mahdi (May God hasten his reapperance) on Thursday.

A large of number of Iranians residing in the cities and lovers of Imam Mahdi (May God expedite his reappearance) gathered at mosques and the Iranian Embassies, cultural centers and consulates in the capital cities to mark the occasion.

The preachers at the ceremonies dwelt on characteristics of the last Imam of Muslims.

Moreover, Muslims in central Asian republics of Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan held glorious ceremonies both on Wednesday and Thursday to celebrate birth anniversary of the last Imam of Prophet Mohammad's infallible household, Hazrat Mahdi (AS) savior of the world (May God hasten his reappearance).

Central Asian Muslims attended the celebrations, which were held on the occasion at Iranian Embassies, cultural centers, consulates, educational complexes and other institutions. (IRNA)

(Contd from Pg. 2)

KHARRAZI...

solution to the current problem would be for the United States to recognize the strategic role that Iran plays in the region, to accept that Iran is an Islamic nation and finally it must respect Islamic and national values.

The Iranian UN permanent representative stated that the Iranian ummah attached great importance to the Islamic teachings and they want to have relations with those countries which respect their religious values.

Asked whether Iran does not pose a threat to the Persian Gulf states as Islamic Iran is trying to beef up its navy, Kharrazi pointed out that Iran has taken such a measure for its defense purposes against the U.S. new warships which have come to the Persian Gulf from other continents as Iran considers such a military move a serious threat to its national interest.

Kharrazi emphasized, "Iran poses no threat to any country," adding that Iran regards the Persian Gulf littoral states as members of a unique family.

He said what the region really needs is peace and stability, but there are certain elements who are trying to incite the neighboring states and stir up relations between Iran and its neighboring states.

Kharrazi concluded that since the Zionists have usurped Muslim lands, "we are against the ongoing Middle East peace process."

Algerian Ship Carries Poppies Mixed With Cargo of Wheat

PORT SAID, Egypt - Port authorities seized an Algerian ship after poppies, which could be used in opium manufacture, were discovered mixed with its cargo of French wheat, police said Friday.

Authorities in this Mediterranean port also referred the freighter Al-Hajjar's captain to the port's general prosecutor after the poppies were found Thursday, said a police official who spoke on condition of anonymity.

Fourteen samples from the cargo were sent to laboratories to check whether the poppies were seeds to be planted or were ready for use in narcotics, the official added. The wheat had been ordered by Egypt's Ministry of Supply. (AP)



TEHRAN (Dec. 25) – Pakistani Ambassador to Tehran, Khalid Mahmood, addresses the audience at the Pakistani Embassy here Wednesday. The gathering was held in commemoration of the late leader of Pakistan Mohammad Ali Jenah on his demise anniversary.

Photo: Abbas Takin

Egyptian Digs Up Her "Lonely" Dead Husband's Skull

CAIRO – An Egyptian woman dug up the skull of her dead husband after he told her in a dream to take him home because he was lonely, a newspaper reported on Thursday.

The widow went at night to a cemetary in a suburb east of Cairo to remove the body of her husband, who died four years ago, but she could only find the skull among his remains, the government newspaper Al-Ahram said.

After being arrested by a police patrol who found her with the skull in her hands, she said her late husband asked her to drive to the cemetary from their home in Menufiya 65 kilometres (40 miles) north of Cairo so she could "console him" in his solitude, the paper added. (AFP)

Not-So-Silent Dutch Night Ends in Bloodshed

AMSTERDAM – A Dutch woman became so enraged with her husband's carol singing that she grabbed a knife and plunged it into his chest, police said on Friday.

The 55-year-old woman, due to appear in court later on Friday, told police that she put up with her spouse singing Silent Night for several hours before stabbing him on boxing day.

The husband is recovering in hospital. (Reuter)

Son's Suicide May Have Sparked Church Bomber's Act

FRANKFURT – The son of the Frankfurt church suicide bomber committed suicide in 1989 reports said Friday, provoking a deep depression in the woman behind the Christmas eve killings which ended in divorce and the loss of custody of her daughter.

According to *Bild*, a mass-circulation daily newspaper, the bomber's son threw himself under a tram in Frankfurt's Sindlingen district when aged 18.

His suicide sent his mother into a deep depression, leading to a breakdown in relations with her husband and a divorce last year in which she lost custody of her nine-year-old daughter, the paper said.

Heidrun Erika J., whose full name has not been released by police, died when she detonated two hand grenades in the middle of a Christmas service at a Protestant church in Sindlingen.

"It is likely that she chose Sindlingen for symbolic reasons," said police spokesman Manfred Feist.

In doing so she killed two worshippers – sisters aged 61 and 59 – who were next to her, and injured thirteen others, ten seriously.

Some 70 people were in the church at the time.

Feist said the woman probably did not intend to kill anyone other than herself but underestimated the power of the grenades, which each contained 100 grams (around four ounces) of the explosive TNT.

The killings cast a cloud over Christmas celebrations in Germany, where a shocked population found itself mourning the Frankfurt victims amid end-of-year festivities.

German President Roman Herzog has expressed his "horror and sadness" at the event and many people have lit candles and laid flowers in front of the church. (AFP)

Taiwan Parties Agree to Reforms Amid Split

TAIPEI – Taiwan's two biggest parties reached a major consensus on political reforms at a state-sponsored multiparty conference on Friday, hours after an angry opposition group announced its withdrawal from the forum.

The ruling Nationalist Party and leading opposition Democratic Progressive Party reached significant consensus at the national development conference, agreeing to freeze all elections at the provincial government level, state radio said.

The two parties have agreed to freeze provincial governor and assembly elections in order to save state resources and increase government efficiency, nationalist lawmaker and deputy convenor of the forum Vincent Siew said on the radio. (Reuter)



LIMA, Peru (December 24): Members of the International Red Cross move large containers for water into the Japanese Ambassador's residence in Lima, where leftist guerrillas are holding some 140 hostages. The guerrillas are demanding the release of some 400 of their jailed comrades. (AFP PHOTO)

First Trial in Rwanda of Genocide Suspects Open

KIBUNGO, Rwanda – The first trial in Rwanda of suspects linked to the country's 1994 genocide opened here Friday, the accused pleading not guilty to massacre charges against him while prosecutors demanded the death sentence, state radio reported.

Former medical assistant Deogratias Bizimana faces 11 counts, including taking part in massacres in the Birenga and sake districts of Kibungo Province, and having "led a group of killers."

He was also accused of carrying weapons, pillaging and failing to help people in danger.

Prosecutors alleged that Bizimana admitted to the crimes, but the defendant – speaking in Kinyarwanda, the national language of Rwanda – told the court that he had confessed under torture.

The prosecution demanded the death sentence for Bizimana, 37, who is married and the father of two children. Some 200 people in the court room noisily applauded the request, while the accused looked calm.

His trial is the first in rwanda of suspects in the 1994 genocide during which Hutu militants killed more than 500,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus. (AFP)

S. Korean Strikes Spread

SEOUL – South Korea's biggest group of labour unions on Friday threw its 1.2 million-strong membership behind a nationwide strike until the end of the year, while the government and employers sought to soothe worker anger.

Nurses at 14 hospitals joined strikes that have almost halted production of cars and ships and that threaten transport chaos when bus drivers and subway staff walk out on Saturday.

More than 15,000 workers raised clenched fists at a rally in Seoul, chanting anti-government slogans as they vented their fury against a labor law passed on Thursday.

The usually moderate federation of Korean Trade Unions added its muscle to a battle over the law that gives employers the right to lay off workers, adopt flexible work hours and replace strikers.

Originally, it planned a 24-hour action starting from midday Friday to noon on Saturday.

But at a news conference, its chairman Park in-Sang announced the walkout would now last until next Tuesday, and possibly into the new year depending on a vote on Monday.

Bus services in major cities would be halted on Saturday, Park said. Subway lines in Seoul operated by federation workers would stop on Monday morning.

If the strikes are extended into the new year that will basically mean an indefinite strike, he added. (Reuter)

Aung San Suu Kyi Allowed to Leave Compound

BANGKOK – Burmese opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi left her home Friday for the first time in about three weeks to pay respects at her mother's tomb on the eighth anniversary of her death.

A statement from military intelligence in Rangoon, received in Bangkok, said that Aung San Suu Kyi was accompanied by senior party leaders to the tomb near the Shwedagon Pagoda.

No explanation was given for the outing. Analysts noted it took place at a time of potential tension in the Burmese capital, where a bomb blast at a Pagoda complex killed five people Wednesday night.

Sources close to the pro-democracy leader said it was the first time she had left the compound since early this month, in the midst of street demonstrations by students asking to form a union and to secure the release of detainees.

Aung San Suu Kyi, who had been living abroad with her British husband and children, returned to Burma to care for her ailing mother and was caught up in the pro-democracy demonstrations of the late 1980s. (AFP)

Tasikmalaya Riots Spread to Neighboring Small Town

TASIKMALAYA, Indonesia – A violent riot which Thursday hit this west Java town, causing extensive damage and leaving at least one dead, Friday spread to the neighboring small town of Ciawi, sources said.

A mob in Ciawi, 14 kilometers (8.4 miles) northwest of Tasikmalaya, burned down at least five shops in the morning, an AFP correspondent said.

"Yes, there was some incident in Ciawi this morning but only two shops were damaged," said an official at the military operational command post, who identified himself as Machfudin.

He declined to give further details but said the situation there was "under control" and that about 100 troops had been dispatched to restore calm.

Crowds were also gathering in Singaparna, just 10 kilometers (six miles) west of Tasikmalaya, but there was no violence, sources said. (AFP)

India's Congress Party President Set to Take Absolute Command

NEW DELHI – Congress (I) Party President Sitaram Kesri is set to take total command of the party, replacing former Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao as parliamentary chief, a party spokesman said Friday.

Kesri, who last week forced the scandal-plagued Rao to resign as Congress Parliamentary Party (CPP) leader, had the backing of "the majority" of Congress members for January 3 polls to choose a replacement, spokesman Vithal Gadgil said.

The post allows the incumbent to become prime minister if the Congress wins a straight majority in general elections.

Rao, who faces corruption charges, was forced to quit as leader of the CPP on December 19 after being pressured to resign as party president in September.

Kesri is not a member of the Lower House of Parliament, but Gadgil said he could still be CPP leader.

"Former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was not a member of the Lower House but she was chosen as the party's parliamentary chief," Gadgil said.

"Kesri is a member of the Upper House. He can be the chief of the CPP." (AFP)

Death Toll in Malaysia Storm Rises to 127

KOTA KINABALU, Malaysia – The death toll climbed Friday to 127 after a tropical storm ripped the west cost of Malaysia's Sabah state in the country's worst natural disaster in recent years, officials said.

A total of 127 bodies had been recovered as of Friday afternoon, 90 of whom had been identified – 82 of them Indonesians and eight local Sabahans, hospital authorities said.

Some 70 people remained unaccounted for, police said, road and telecommunication lines to the affected districts have been severed and an estimated 5,000 people have been left homeless.

About 30 injured people who were plucked out of muddy debris were admitted to the district hospital in the worst hit area of Keningau, in the remote interior of the state on Borneo Island, hospital officials said. (AFP)

JESSORE, Bangladesh (Dec. 24): Supporters from the main opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party march in Dhaka against the graft charges brought by the government Anti-Corruption Bureau last week against their leader and former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia. The march turned violent near downtown Press Club with police firing tear gas to break up the stone-throwing demonstrators. (AFP PHOTO)

Cuban Legislatu
Helms-Burton Cou
Japan's Jobless Rate Falls

Cuban Legislature Approves Helms-Burton Countermeasure

MEXICO CITY — Taking steps to counter a new U.S. law, Cuba has approved a measure to protect foreign companies that invest in the communist-ruled Caribbean nation.

The Cuban law, passed Tuesday, is aimed at reducing the impact of the Helms-Burton Act, which seeks to punish some foreign companies doing business with Cuba, according to Cuban news reports monitored in Mexico City.

The Cuban law appears aimed at Cuban dissidents who would help Washington implement the Helms-Burton Act.

"The text (of the law) qualifies as illicit any type of collaboration with Washington to apply the Helms-Burton Law," the official Cuban Prensa Latina news agency reported.

Under Helms-Burton, Americans whose property was confiscated in Cuba after Fidel Castro's 1959 revolution can sue foreign businesses who now use those properties. It also denies the executives of such foreign firms entry into the United States.

Cuba's new law declares Helms-Burton illegal and seeks sanctions against anyone who publishes or broadcasts arguments in favor of it in Cuba.

The news reports did not provide other details, including penalties for breaking the new law.

"We are obliged to win this battle," President Fidel Castro told the the Cuban Parliament, which unanimously approved the measure Tuesday.

One part of the law declared illegal "providing information or collaborating in any form with radio stations or television or other propaganda media of the United States" that would help apply the Helms-Burton Law.

That part of the law appears directed at dissidents on the island who maintain links to the U.S. government's Radio Marti, which broadcasts news and anti-Castro propaganda to Cuba by shortwave from Miami.

Cuba considers the Radio Marti transmissions a hostile act. They were brought up in immigration discussions between Cuban and American officials earlier this month in Havana, Notimex reported.

President Clinton signed Helms-Burton into law after Cuba shot down two U.S. civilian planes flown by Cuban exiles off the island's coast in February.

Mexico and Canada, which have significant investments in Cuba, earlier passed their own "antidote" laws. Those countries, as well as the European Union, have protested the Helms-Burton act, saying it discourages global trade and violates international law.

Foreign investment in projects ranging from beach resorts to towel factories has become a crucial motor for economic development in Cuba since the breakup of its principal benefactor, the Soviet Union.

(AP)

S. Korea Economic Recovery Seen Hit by Labor Unrest

SEOUL — If industrial chaos unleashed by unions furious at the passage of a new labor law persists, it could delay South Korea's economic recovery, hit exports and cast a pall over a weak stock market, analysts said on Thursday.

But the downturn was a bitter pill that had to be swallowed to help the nation's boardrooms restructure for a more profitable future, they added.

The ruling New Korea Party rammed a bill allowing lay-offs and flexible work hours through Parliament on Thursday.

Strikes were almost immediately called by the outlawed Korea Confederation of Trade Unions, halting production at leading auto makers and shipyards.

The main union organization, the Federation of Korean Trade Unions, advanced its plan for a two-day strike to Friday afternoon from Saturday.

If these strikes continue for a long time, this will have a major detrimental effect on the economy in the first quarter of next year, said Tae Chung, head of research at Jardine Fleming Securities in Seoul.

The strikes will lead to production losses, export losses and a deterioration of the current account deficit, he added.

The stock market fell more than 22 points to touch a new year low of 655.24 on Thursday before closing at 659.01. It has declined by 26 percent from the beginning of this year.

In the worst case scenario, according to the Daewoo Economic Research Institute, labor disputes could spin into prolonged struggles between labor and management, as seen during 1989.

Over a five-month period in 1989, 409,000 workers took part in strikes that robbed the nation of 63.51 million work days, the institute said. Lost production was valued at 42 billion won ($49 million), and lost exports at 1.36 billion.

If that situation was repeated, South Korea could see its gross domestic product (GDP) growth decline to 5.6 percent, compared with estimates of growth of 5.9 percent under normal circumstances, the institute showed.

The government's leading think tank, the Korea Development Institute (KDI), has estimated that GDP grew by seven percent this year.

Chung said despite the spectre of industrial mayhem, he now planned to recommend Korean stocks to long-term foreign investors.

The new labor act will have a very positive impact on the economy, he said. Short-term, this will come at the expense of strikes, labor unrest and further deterioration of the economy. But this should be off-set by the long-term recovery.

Some analysts said a short strike could even help ease an overload of inventory in key sectors, such as automaking.

A strike could be a short-term positive factor, said Jon Chong-Hwa, an analyst at Hanmuri Salomon Securities. But two weeks or longer, it would be a blow to the bottom line.

Automakers were running stockpiles of one month on average, Jon said, compared with an ideal one to two-week supply.

Hyundai Motor, the nation's largest carmaker, stood to be hurt the most by labor unrest, he said. Hyundai's Union Workers walked out on Thursday, halting production.

Though Hyundai Motor has had a quite stable relationship with the union this year, the union for the Hyundai group as a whole is very tough, he said.

The carmaker had been forecast to see recurring profits of 310 billion won on sales of 13 trillion in 1997, compared with 400 billion on revenue of 11.8 trillion this year.

Net earnings figures for 1996 were distorted by a huge write-off due to Hyundai's liquidation of a Canadian plant.

The estimates were likely to be revised downwards, Jon said, due to this year's bearish market and possible impact from a prolonged strike.

(Reuter)

European Investments in India Touch $9.6 Billion

NEW DELHI, India — European investors are competing with American counterparts in tapping the market boom in India, the Hindu Business Line newspaper said Thursday.

European investments in India reached an all time high of $9. 6 billion in 1996, an increase of 18 percent over last year.

But the American competitors still led with approved direct investments crossing $12 billion in 1996, Press Trust of India news agency said.

Britain with an investment of $4.8 billion led the European investors, followed by Germany ($4 billion), Nertherlands ($3.2 billion and France ($1.6 billion).

The major European investments have been in telecommunication, railroad, power, automobile and steel industries.

(AP)

Naira Surges as Nigeria Suspends Interbank Foreign Exchange Market

LAGOS — The value of the naira, the Nigerian currency, has suddenly risen by more than 10 percent this week against the U.S. dollar as the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) formally suspended the inter-bank foreign exchange market.

One U.S. dollar which exchanged for 80 naira a little more than a week ago, currently goes for 70 naira, or 65 naira in some places.

The CBN has announced that it would again allow foreign exchange market operation after the 1997 budget is presented to the nation by General Sani Abacha and after analysis of it has been carried out by the Finance Minister Chief Anthony Ani.

January 1 had always been the traditional day for the head of state to present a New Year's budget to the nation. But this has not been done since the present regime came to power in November 1993.

The 1996 budget was presented to the nation by Sani Abacha last February 16.

The influx of Nigerians returning home for vacation, bringing large sums of foreign currency, and wide speculation that government might in the New Year fix the exchange rate at about 60 naira to a dollar are considered by analysts as responsible for the current rise in the naira's value.

Some government economic advisers have said publicly that there is a dire need to enhance the value of the naira vis-a-vis other currencies to encourage investors and bring down inflation.

The Minister of Finance Anthony Ani hinted recently that the 1997 budget would focus on economic growth and bringing down inflation.

(AFP)

Persian Gulf Economies Stabilize After War Shock

ABU DHABI – The economies of six Persian Gulf Arab states have stabilized over the past two years after they were jolted by large cash payments to counter the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, an official study showed.

The Persian Gulf Cooperation Council (PGCC) countries suffered from a mammoth budget deficit of $60.8 billion in 1991 although they were forced to withdraw from their overseas assets to finance the liberation of Kuwait, according to the study by the chairman of the Arab Monetary Fund (AMF), Jassim al-Manai.

But sharp spending cuts in the following years triggered by weak oil prices and accumulating debt slashed the shortfall to around $11.6 billion in 1995 and it will likely go further down this year, Manai said in his study, presented to a PGCC investment seminar in Qatar last week.

The paper, obtained from the Abu Dhabi-based AMF on Friday, showed the six members also managed to trim a record balance of payment deficit of $50.8 billion in 1991 to only $2.5 billion in 1995.

This means the budget shortfall was cut from 32.8 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) to 5.3 percent and the balance of payment gap from around 27.4 percent to only 1.2 percent in the same period, the study said.

"The overall economic situation in the PGCC is now characterized with stability on both the internal and external levels," Manai said.

"PGCC states have succeeded in achieving that stability by slashing the deficit in their budgets and balances of payments through the adoption of policies aimed at rationalizing expenditure and realising fiscal balance."

PGCC states Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) paid more than $65 billion to finance a U.S.-dominated international coalition that ejected Iraqi troops from Kuwait in early 1991.

The bulk of the funds were contributed by Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, which were forced to withdraw from their overseas assets and borrow from international markets for the first time.

Such payments combined with weak oil prices in the following two years to prompt the PGCC governments to reduce expenditure as part of overall reforms, which also include privatization and attracting capital.

Their efforts were supported by a recovery in oil prices in 1995 and their economies recorded one of their best performances this year because of a further improvement in crude prices, according to bankers.

"The combined PGCC budget deficit was projected at around nine billion dollars this year but with the increase in oil prices, it is believed to have been cut to below half," an Abu Dhabi-based bank manager said. "This means the shortfall has been reduced to less than two percent of the PGDP."

The price rise of around three dollars this year has fetched the six members, which control 45 percent of the world's crude reserves, nearly $12 billion in extra earnings to push their income to its highest level since the oil boom of early 1980s.

Despite the limited return of sanctions-hit Iraq to the oil market this year, Persian Gulf officials expect another good year in 1997.

(AFP)

Japanese Ministers Divided Over Budget's Adverse Impact on Markets

TOKYO — Finance Minister Hiroshi Mitsuzuka admitted Friday that declines in Japanese share prices and the yen's value over the past week "probably" reflected investor dismay over the budget for the coming year.

But Chief Cabinet Secretary Seiroku Kajiyama dismissed the view, instead blaming "psychological factors" for the downturn in financial markets.

Mitsuzuka and Kajiyama were speaking at separate news conferences following a regular cabinet meeting which came two days after the government approved the budget for the new fiscal year starting in April.

Business leaders expressed disappointment with the budget drawn up by the Finance Ministry last week, and the Nikkei stock average plunged as much as 3.7 percent Thursday before stabilizing on Friday. The yen meanwhile remained weak against the dollar after plunging to a 45-month low on Thursday.

Asked if disappointment with the budget, which included few incentives for economic growth, was responsible for the recent weakness in share prices and the yen, Mitsuzuka said: "Probably, yes."

The finance minister said he "cannot agree" with objections to the budget among business leaders and called on market participants to remain calm.

"Comprehensive judgements cannot be made without looking at the broader aspects," he said.

Kajiyama, the official Japanese government spokesman, said separately that the budget was the "first step towards fiscal reform" and urged reporters to refrain from causing concern among financial market participants.

"The decline in share prices and the yen's value reflects psychological factors," he said. "I would like to ask you to exercise self-restraint and confidence in making remarks to avoid fuelling market concerns unnecessarily."

(AFP)

Japan's Jobless Rate Falls

TOKYO — Japan's jobless rate improved slightly in November, falling to 3.3 percent from October's 3.4 percent, the government said Friday.

Briefing reporters, an official with the Statistics Bureau of the Management and Coordination Agency, which compiles the data, welcomed the improvement but said it was impossible to say if it heralded a new trend.

"At this point it is too soon to say whether the unemployment rate will continue to decline," he said.

Nor could he say whether the jobless rate had peaked when it hit a post-war high of 3.5 percent in May and June.

"We'll have to see the December numbers before we can say (that it has peaked) with some confidence," he said.

The official said the 2.12 million unemployed was the lowest total since April 1992.

Japan's unemployment rate would be significantly higher if calculated by U.S. or European methods. Anyone who has worked an hour or more in the last week of a given month is counted as fully employed in Japan.

Separately, the Labor Ministry reported Friday that the ratio of job offers to job seekers, an indicator of demand for labor, improved in November.

(AFP)

Bank of France Official Predicts 2.5 Percent Growth

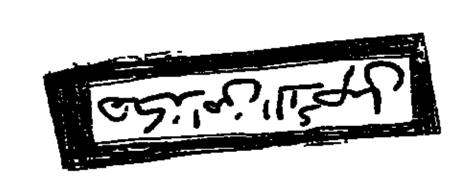
PARIS — A senior Bank of France official on Thursday predicted growth of more than 2.5 percent for the country in 1997.

"Yes, it's O.K. It (growth) has begun. The problem is that we will see a discrepancy between the effect of this resumption and employment. But I'm telling you, we will have more than 2.5 percent growth," Paul Marchelli, one of the members of the Bank of France board on monetary policy, said in an interview with Radio Monte Carlo.

Earlier this month, Economy Minister Jean Arthuis declared that anticipated 2.3 percent growth for 1997 was "not an aim, but a lower limit."

Turning to the issue of the common European currency, Marchelli said he had voted for the Maastricht Treaty on European Union, "but with a certain anxiety which proved to be founded when you look at the difficulties we are experiencing at the moment."

(AFP)



Life on Mars Story Energizes Space Exploration

WASHINGTON — When future historians look back on 1996, they may bypass political change and economic ferment in favor of some of the most cosmic news ever to hit the headlines: the report that there might be life on Mars.

Ever since the august day when U.S. space scientists unveiled a chunk of grey rock alleged to contain biological fossils from Mars, the world's imagination has been fired by the possibility we might not be alone in the solar system.

A later report of polar ice on the moon — possibly the remnant of a comet's dusty tail — further fuelled fascination.

But decades-old space technology showed a troubling tendency to break down at crucial moments, sending a 300 million Russian Mars probe crashing back to Earth, keeping shuttle astronauts from taking a scheduled space walk and stranding U.S. scientist Shannon Lucid aboard the Russian Mir station.

These two factors — the decline of old technology and the rise in interest in extraterrestrial life — have helped push the National Aeronautics and Space Administration away from years of emphasis on human exploration of space and towards a focus on space-faring robots, telescopes and other machines.



Robots Will Blaze the Trail

"We shouldn't be sending people until we do some reconnaissance with robots," NASA chief Dan Goldin told reporters before the launch of Sojourner, a remote-controlled vehicle the size of a large toy truck meant to survey the Martian surface like a mechanical geologist.

"I don't think a robot has the dexterity or the ability to reason like a human has, but it's unreasonable to just say let's go send a human to Mars and feel good when the nation has a whole variety of financial issues to face up to," Goldin said.

Goldin's best guess was that human beings could venture to Mars in the second decade of the 21st century.

But the tantalizing question of whether Mars might support life could be answered before that, in 2003, when the first samples of rock collected on Mars could be returned to Earth.

The reported biological Martian fossils were found in Antarctica, presumably from a meteorite that fell to Earth from Mars 16 million years ago. If the fossils collected on Mars match the fossils from Antarctica, scientists would have much more to go on in their quest for Martian life.

Anyone out there?

Ever since the august day when U.S. space scientists unveiled a chunk of grey rock alleged to contain biological fossils from Mars, the world's imagination has been fired by the possibility we might not be alone in the solar system.

The United States will continue to conduct staffed space flights aboard the ageing space shuttle fleet and in cooperation with the Russian Mir, and the long-delayed launch of the first element of the 17 billion international space station is set to take place in 1997.

However, astronomical discoveries are gaining pride of place in the global debate over outer space.

A spate of startling images from the repaired Hubble Space Telescope have stimulated speculation on whether life exists outside our solar system, when the universe began, how stars are born and how old the oldest heavenly bodies are.

In the last 12 months, Hubble has shown astronomers a Texas-sized dust storm on Mars, a movie of Neptune's wild weather, a blinking pulsar twirling at the heart of the Crab Nebula and the results of a smashup between two distant galaxies.

In addition to pretty pictures, NASA is also stressing the philosophical and scientific implications of the search for cosmic beginnings in its so-called origins program.

At a White House meeting on the subject, religious, scientific and policy leaders framed the essential questions they said might be answered in the next 15 years. These included:

"I don't think we're alone ... It'll take some time to contact them, but one day we will meet them and we will be surprised because they will be very different from us."

- When and how primitive life emerged on Earth?
- Whether there is or was life on Mars?
- Whether the presence of water on one of Jupiter's moons might harbor primitive life?
- Whether other planetary systems might foster life?
- How the early stages of the universe unfolded?

For some, the question of whether extraterrestrial life exists is not even an issue.

"Yes, definitely, there's life out there," Mike Kaplan, director of NASA's origins program, said earlier in the year.

"I don't think we're alone ... It'll take some time to contact them, but one day we will meet them and we will be surprised because they will be very different from us." (Reuter)

UAE Bars Foreign Lawyers From Court Appearances

ABU DHABI — Foreign lawyers will no longer be allowed to appear in court in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) but will be permitted to practice from their offices, lawyers said recently.

A new law endorsed by the cabinet early this year permitted only local lawyers to appear in court to defend clients as part of a campaign to nationalize jobs and ease reliance on foreign labor.

"The law took effect today (Monday)," Suleiman al-Minhali, a local lawyer, told AFP. "We now are the only lawyers authorized to take lawsuits in court."

The new rules allow foreign lawyers to become partner with UAE nationals but confines their activities to their offices.

Foreign lawyers have been given five years to adjust to the new rules, which were first announced in 1991. They were ratified in March this year.

Justice Ministry sources said the new law was part of a job nationalization drive and was designed to ensure jobs for the growing number of native lawyers.

According to *Al Bayan* newspaper, the new law stipulated local lawyers must not be below 23 years of age and must be registered with the Justice Ministry. (AFP)

Hang Out With Sharks Along Maldives Coral Reefs

THE MALDIVES — Imagine watching sharks chase iridescent schools of fish as you drift weightlessly with the current and breathe freely deep in a crystalline coral sea.

If that's your idea of a thrill, far from hurly-burly civilization, take a scuba-diving cruise in the Indian Ocean archipelago of the Maldives.

"Gear up, folks!" shouted the Australian dive master, wearing a black baseball cap with no fear scrawled in white across the front and a pair of eyes in the back.

That was the signal for our diving group to strap on air tanks and plunge from a converted Maldivian dhoni (fishing boat) into a whole new world.

Imagine watching sharks chase iridescent schools of fish as you drift weightlessly withthe current and breathe freely deep in a crystalline coral sea.

While there are many places to dive along vivid coral reefs in the tropics, the Maldives are renowned for the big pelagic species — sharks and rays — that do not threaten humans, unless provoked, and normally stick to remote open waters.

The best way to see them, as well as exotic and colorful reef denizens like the hawksbill turtle, leopard moray eel and golden trumpet fish, is to wander the Maldives atolls on a live-aboard dive safari boat.

We spent two weeks on the MV Keema, a British-run, 26-meter (85-ft) vessel with six twin-berth cabins, desalinated showers, an audio-visual dive library and delectable meals of fish caught daily on the voyage.

There is no alcohol aboard the Keema or anywhere in the chain of 1,190 tiny islands, except on 72 reserved only for tourists, because the Maldives is a Muslim nation.

But no one comes to these isles to party. They come to see the underwater wonders and heavenly white-sand beaches skirted by coconut palms.

Between dives on the Keema, you can sunbathe, read, listen to music from a portable CD player or just gaze out to sea, sweeping out to the four horizons in streaks of emerald, aqua, turquoise and ultramarine blue.

A former British colony, the Maldives is Asia's smallest nation with 245,000 people living mainly from fishing and tourism. Male (maa-lay) is the quaint capital, and only sizeable town, where most people still get around on bicycles.

Two brief stops at resort islands, where pop music blares and noisy package tourists swarm, confirm that staying on a boat is more relaxing — if one can live with periodic rough seas, stiff bunk beds and no air-conditioning.

The trade winds temper the sultry heat, between 26 and 33 degrees Celsius (77 and 92 Fahrenheit) year round.

"I got into this frightful routine of being unable to avoid the Maldives on my return flight from Singapore, where I often go on business, so I've now been on the Keema 11 times," said Gordon Taylor, 58, a lace-curtain manufacturer from Scotland.

Taylor, a former competitive swimmer who has dived for 25 years and says he often leaps into chilly Scottish seas to snare lobsters, was in formidably good shape.

The group of nine on the Keema included a 56-year-old American arms manufacturing executive and his wife a 47-year-old Singapore Chinese doctor, a tiny woman who slipped into the depths like a mermaid and a young London fund manager with an underwater video camera.

There was a friendly young Maldivian boat crew of five, one of whom had fallen in love with an Austrian woman diver and dreamed of joining her in Europe soon.

The Keema's captain and dive master is Carl Nicholls, a bronzed and easygoing Aussie, flaxen hair flowing from under his no fear cap. Nicholls, 31, from Perth, hopes eventually to pursue a marine-biology degree.

One has to be a certified diver — certified lunatic, some joke — to go on dive cruises. But some boats like the Keema offer the standard four-day course to beginners.

The dhoni dive boat trails the Keema between atolls — ringlike coral formations arrayed like garlands across hundreds of km of sea, enclosing minuscule isles sprinkled some 650 km (400 miles) southwest of Sri Lanka.

Two or three times a day, depending on weather, the puttering dhoni took us out to choice coral reefs, often next to channels with strong currents that bring in nutrients vital for healthy coral and profuse fish life.

During the day sharks fin aimlessly along reef walls. At night, they chase small fish for dinner with their jaws maniacally snapping open and shut.

The eagle ray, diamond-shaped and up to two meters (6.6 ft) in size, with a long whip tail, flapped by like a great bird of the deep. A school of rays paraded by at a depth of 25 meters (82 ft), somewhat like models on a catwalk.

In the glassy, limpid shallows off one beach, tiny sting rays glided silently or slept on the sand bed.

One has to be a certified diver — certified lunatic, some joke — to go on dive cruises. But some boats like the Keema offer the standard four-day course to beginners.

Turtles chewed audibly on tasty coral and flapped in slow motion to the surface to get a gulp of air before submerging again. The Maldivian government has banned the catching of turtles in a conservation move.

Huge manta rays and whale sharks, both harmless to divers, also roam Maldives reef channels at certain times of the year. (Reuter)

Two Women Police Killed in Bank Robbery

CORDOBA, Spain — Two female police officers were killed in a shootout with four Italian bank robbers along a downtown street in this popular tourist city.

The slain officers, each with 15 years on the force, were the first female police officers killed in Cordoba, police officials said.

Two other police officers were wounded in the shooting.

One of the robbers remained at large after he hijacked a taxi following the 9 a.m. (0800 GMT) shootout.

Two other robbers were wounded and later captured as the gang, using submachine guns, attempted to escape through the city's narrow cobblestone streets, said city officials. Another robber was captured an hour later when he returned to his hotel.

Wearing fake wigs and false noses, the robbers, their faces partially hidden, entered the Santander Bank on the tree-lined Plaza de la Tendillas in the city's center at 8:30 a.m.

Bank employees, held at gunpoint, led the robbers to the bank's main vault and later to its automatic money dispensing machine, said a Banco Santander spokesman in Madrid.

The bank would not say how much money was stolen or whether the money has been recovered.

The slain police officers were identified as Maria Angeles Garcia, 40, a widow with two children, and Maria Soledad Munoz, 36, who was married. (AP)

Technical Failure Blamed on Hong Kong Plane Crash

HONG KONG — The Hong Kong government on Monday issued a report blaming technical problems for the crash of a Hercules transporter plane here in September 1994 in which six crew were killed.

The plane dived into Hong Kong Harbor on take-off for its return to base in Indonesia, after completing a mission to repatriate Vietnamese boatpeople.

The investigation concluded the "most likely cause of the accident was a malfunction" affecting one of the aircraft's four propellers, a government statement said.

The propellor was found to be in "fine pitch," a mode that is only used for taxiing on the ground, it said.

This caused a loss of lift and pilot control at a critical moment during takeoff, and the plane crashed, it said.

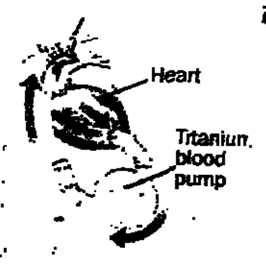
Six out of 12 people were killed in the incident on September 23 1994. The plane that day had earlier completed two flights from Hong Kong to Hanoi, ferrying back 66 Vietnamese migrants under a forced repatriation program.

Nine safety recommendations have been made, six of them to the plane's Indonesian operators, Pelita Air Service, it said.

Two others concern the advice of Lockheed, manufacturers of the Hercules transporter, on emergency procedures and the type of throttle cable used. (AFP)









Honoring the Self:

How to Grow Self-Confidence, Self-Respect

At birth the self does not exist. What exists is the raw material from which the self can develop.

A new-born infant does not yet have a sense of personal identity. There is no awareness of separateness, at least not the kind we adults experience.

To evolve into self-hood is the primary human challenge. Because success is not guaranteed. At each step of the way, we confront some form of the question "Shall I honor or betray the self?"

The challenge to honor the self calls on the heroic possibilities of our nature. It calls on the will to think, to understand, to remain true to our understanding, to struggle, to endure, to persevere and to remain open and responsive to life.

1- You must accept everything, positive and negative, that you know about yourself.

2- You ought to take responsibility for all your choices and actions.

3- You should be able to trust your mind to make decisions that guide your life.

4- You must be committed to becoming aware of your feelings and the impulses behind your actions.

A person who does not feel confident in the performance of some particular task such as operating a business, designing a computer program or flying an aeroplane does not necessarily suffer from a poor self-esteem. But a physically healthy person who feels fundamentally inadequate to the normal challenges of life, such as earning a living, most certainly does. I think we all agree on that.

A person who feels undeserving of some particular award or honor such as a Nobel Prize or universal adulation for having dashed off a fairly nice painting or having created a piece of art, again does not necessarily lack a good self-esteem.

But a person who feels undeserving of happiness, who feels unworthy of any joy or award in life, surely has a self-esteem deficiency.

So what we want to see is that self-esteem is a concept pertaining to our fundamental sense of efficacy and our fundamental sense of worth.

High self-esteem can best be understood then, as the integrated sum of self-confidence and self-respect:

Self-confidence is confidence in my own mind to cope with basic challenges of life. Self-respect is the feeling of personal worth: "Is it appropriate that I should be happy?. That others should find me lovable? That I should be treated with respect? That my needs and wants should matter to those close to me? Self-respect answers '*Yes*' to these questions.

So we can summarize everything we have been discussing with this simple formulation: Self-esteem is the experience that I am competent to cope with the challenges of life and that I am deserving of happiness, which includes the perception that I am loveable.

Is it possible to possess too high a level of self-esteem? Not if we understand that we are speaking of authentic self-esteem. A genuine organic experience and not some over-inflated pretence at self-value.

No one would ask: 'Is it possible to enjoy too high a level of physical health?' Health is an unqualified desirable, so is positive self-esteem.

Here is a point we need to grasp. Genuine self-esteem is not competitive or comparative. Neither is genuine self-esteem expressed by self-glorification at the expense of others. Or by the quest to make one-self superior to all others or to diminish others as to elevate one-self.

Arrogance, boastfulness and over-estimation of our abilities reflect inadequate self-esteem rather than as some people imagine too high a level of self-esteem. In human beings joy in the mere fact of existing is a core meaning of a healthy self-esteem. It is a state of one who is at war neither with herself nor with others.

What does it mean to honor the self? Honoring the self is the assertion of consciousness - meaning the choice to think, to be aware, to send the search light of consciousness outward toward the world and inward toward our inner being.

To default on this effort is to default on ourselves at its most basic level.

To honor the self is to be willing to think independently. To live by our own mind and to have the courage to have our own perception and judgements.

To honor the self is not only what we think but also what we feel, want, need, desire, suffer over, are frightened by or angered by. And to accept our right to experience such feelings.

To honor the self is to preserve an attitude of self-acceptance, which means to accept what we are without self-oppression or self-castigation. Without any pretence about the truth of our own being. Pretence aimed at deceiving either ourselves or anyone else.

To honor the self is to live authentically. To speak and act from our most inner convictions and feeling

To honor the self is to refuse to accept unearned guilt - unjustifiable guilt - and to do our best to correct such guilts as we may have earned.

To honor the self is to be committed to our right to exist, which comes from the knowledge that our life does not belong to others and that we are not here on earth to live up to someone else's expectations.

To many people this is a terrifying responsibility.

To honor the self is to be in love with our own life, in love with our own responsibilities for growth and for experiencing joy, in love with the process of discovering and exploring our distinctively humane potentialities.

These are all characteristics and behaviors of a person who honors the self.

1- Awareness, including self-awareness
2- Self acceptance
3- Self-responsibility
4- Integrity
5- Independent thinking

These are the key pillars of self-esteem. We will begin with the first one, the central one, the commitment to awareness and self-awareness.

The commitment to awareness which means living consciously pertains both to our awareness of our external world, our awareness of our behavior and our awareness of inner world of thoughts, emotions, feelings, needs and values. One of the meanings - one of the central meanings - of living consciously is the question and concerned with the questions "What are my purposes? What are my strategies? Is my behavior, in fact, in alignment with my strategies and purposes?"

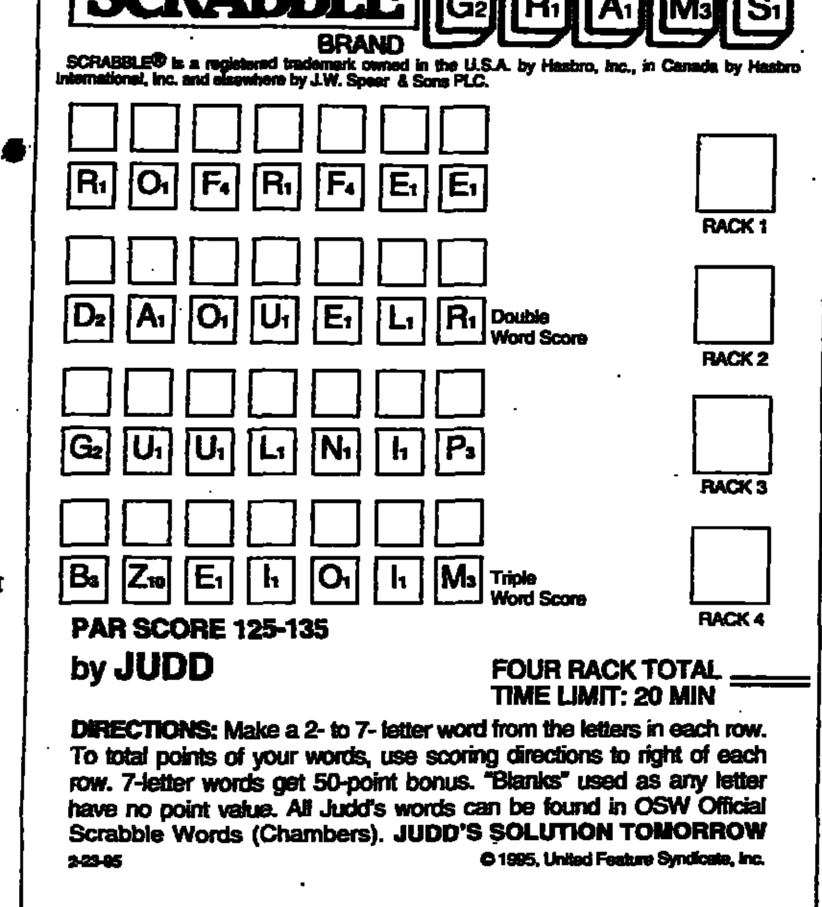
People who live consciously, people who live out of a commitment to awareness are very concerned with these questions.

Internally, with regard to the internal focus, it means a continuing, interesting, identifying our own needs, our own wants. Recognizing, owning, accepting our own feelings and emotions. Clarifying our own values and aspirations. And monitoring our own behavior to be certain that it is in alignment with our goals.

Now, a sub-point here is that living consciously, living out of a commitment to awareness means paying attention to the results of our behavior, not living like a drunken driver. Noticing what works and what does not work, what advances us, what retards us. What makes us feel better about ourselves, what makes us feel worse about ourselves.

If we want to understand ourselves, if we want to really not be strangers to ourselves and be on intimate relations with ourselves, we need to experience our emotions and not just name them. And perhaps a little anecdote will illustrate what I mean: Suppose that my spouse asks me: "How are you?" And I respond: "Fine", in somewhat an irritating way. Perhaps I am preoccupied about something. And then she might say: "It looks as though you're really distressed about something." And I pause and I go deeper into myself and I then take a breath and I sort of sink in what I am feeling and I say: "Yes. I'm worried about such and such.. and now I am beginning to actually experience the feeling, and talk about it intelligently and share it. And what then typically will happen is I will get release and I will get relief from tension. I will be able to be more appropriate in the conversation and often I can gain relief from the troublesome feeling through the simple act of allowing myself first to experience it honestly: to own it, and then to express it, in this case, to someone who cares and who is truly interested.

(Contd on Pg.14)



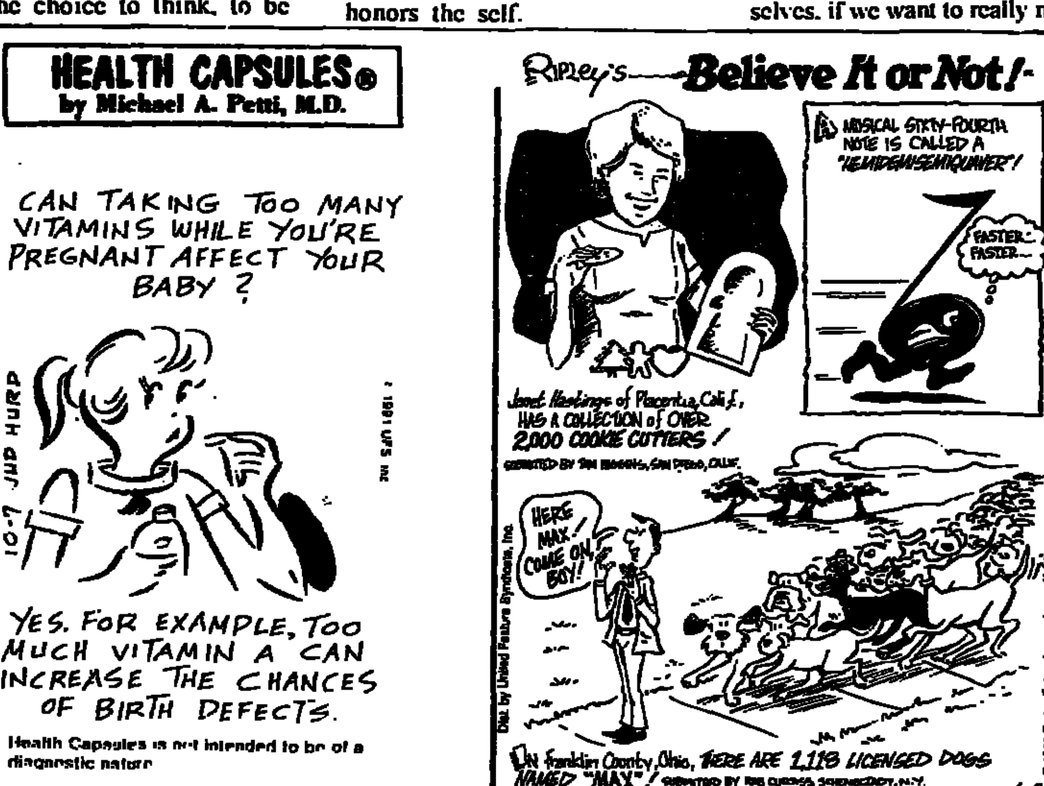
SCRABBLE BRAND GRAMS SOLUTION BY JUDD

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L1	A1	T1	C3	H4	E1	T1	RACK 1 =	63
E1	M3	B3	O1	D2	Y4		RACK 2 =	42
G2	L1	O1	W4	E1	R1		RACK 3 =	10
P3	I1	L1	G2	R1	I1	M3	RACK 4 =	62

PAR SCORE 110-120 JUDD'S TOTAL 177

2-22-95



THOUGHT

It is reported from Ali-ibn-al Hussein [Imam Sajjad] (AS), who quoted the Messiah (AS), as having told his disciples: "Verily, this world is merely a bridge, so cross it, and do not become preoccupied by it."

(Bahar, Vol. 14, P. 219)

PRAYER

Noon.......12:06
Evening.......17:21
Dawn (tomorrow)....... 05:35
Sunrise (tomorrow).......07:14

TODAY IN HISTORY

1938 - Iraq severs relations with France.

1948 - Premier Nokrashy Pasha of Egypt is assassinated.

1950 - Chinese forces cross 38th parallel in Korea.

1962 - United Nations troops engage in heavy fighting in Katanga.

1968 - Israeli commandos raid Beirut Airport, destroying 13 Muslim aircrafts.

1970 - Military court in Spain sentences six Basque separatists to death.

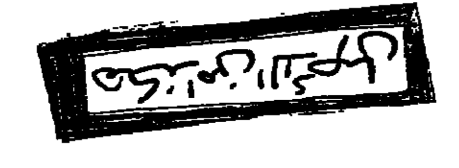
1974 - Leftist guerrillas in Managua, Nicaragua, invade Christmas party for U.S. ambassador, take several prominent Nicaraguans hostage.

1975 - Efforts are made to rescue 372 men trapped by coal mine explosion in northeastern India, all 372 are killed.

1984 - Cambodian guerrillas counter attack for fourth straight day depite withering artillery fire from Vietnamese occupying refugee camp along Thi-Cambodian border.

1986 - Excursion train lets off its 180 passengers in Tokyo, then plunged off a bridge, killing six people, most of them in a factory below.

1990 - Indian government opens talks with Sikh leaders on ending 7 yers old secessionist struggle in Punjab.



Greek PM Wins First Round in Fight for Reform

ATHENS - Prime Minister Costas Simitis has scored the first victory in his reform campaign to raise Greece to EU standards and meet the tough economic targets required to join a planned single European currency.

Simitis, a taciturn pro-European technocrat, has faced down the country's militant farmers and seamen over the past three weeks and forced them to retreat without giving an inch.

Political commentators were quick to advise Simitis not to gloat after the farmers called off their 25-day road blockade over the weekend and the seamen gave up a week-long port strike. The government would be very wrong to hold the illusion that the calmness of the holidays will last long, wrote the pro-government *Ta Nea* newspaper in its editorial.

On the contrary, it should use the reprieve it has received (from farmers and seamen) to find solutions before the wounds are reopened.

But for Simitis, who won elections in September on pledges of economic reform and said he would rather resign than yield to militant demands, it must have been a sweet moment. The farmers gave Simitis the chance to show off the image he likes to project: the steady, reliable leader who does not back down regardless of the political costs, wrote commentator Pavlos Tsimas. Simitis' economic reforms, especially new taxes and an end to a host of special interest tax breaks, have triggered a wave of strikes over the past month. Farmers, seamen, teachers, doctors, public administrators and diplomats have all taken to the streets in protest or gone out on strike against his policies and 1997 budget. But Simitis stood firm and said Greece must choose between economic disaster and making the sacrifices needed to cut big deficits and join European Economic and Monetary Union (EMU). Before Sunday's budget vote he said it was a disgrace Greece came last in every EU economic chart. The EU's only Balkan state, Greece is also the only member which has failed to meet any of the Maastricht Treaty criteria for EMU and a single European currency. Even the Czech Republic and Hungary have better economic indicators than we do, Simitis lamented in parliament. Along with his victories over farmers and seamen, in which he counted on patience rather than force, Simitis also saw his budget passed by a vote of 160 to 136 over the weekend. The budget counts on meeting ambitious revenue targets by new or higher taxes, and by abolishing hundreds of tax breaks. It also curbs spending and limits public sector hiring. We will take all necessary measures. We will implement all necessary proposals so that Greece responds to the challenge of the European Union, Simitis told Parliament.

He has proved himself a skilful tactician by maneuvering to take over as prime minister when Socialist Party founder Andreas Papandreou resigned in poor health last January.

He then fought his way to the top in a bruising leadership battle in June and stamped his seal on power when he gambled on an early national election in September and won. A dry and humorless leader, the German-educated commercial lawyer and British-educated economist, never fails to remind his compatriots that they must make greater economic sacrifices. I am in politics to apply certain ideas about society, he told an interviewer. My job is to spread the existing money in a socially just way. His next challenge will come early next year when farmers and seamen, who have shown they can paralyze Greece's transport, have vowed renewed action unless their demands are met. (Reuter)

Mafiosi Spread Capitalist Message in Siberia

KEMEROVO, Russia - Meet Vasya and Kostya. In their late 20s, cynical and sharp, they are making money out of the crisis in the Russian mining industry which has brought a wave of strikes to this heavily industrialized region.

Vasya, who has a fondness for food and comfortable tracksuits after work, is the boss. It is his sparkling imported Jeep with tinted windows they are driving around frozen western Siberia, combining, as they put it, business with pleasure.

That means their days are spent recovering from the previous evening's drinking and selling mine managers equipment and other supplies — manufactured with the energy from their own coal — at a hefty markup.

In the evenings they retire to a hotel restaurant — where Vasya orders double portions — and then to the local casino to hone their skills at billiards and talk about the weekend's skiing they are planning at the end of their business trip.

They do not have the usual attributes of the hated Mafia, a catch-all term in Russia covering anyone from gangsters to government officials who have made a lot of money.

They have no gold chains, bodyguards or guns. Nor are they the sons of influential men, although they deal with them.

We were at a mine today where the directors' sons have set up a company to supply the workers with goods. We got there just in time to join in the deal said Kostya.

Vasya said his father was an industrial worker in Novosibiirsk who, like millions of others in Russia, had not been paid for months. He goes to work because he doesn't know what else to do, he said, explaining why the father and his workmates, unlike thousands of others, have not gone on strike.

Middlemen like Vasya and Kostya are objects of hate amongst the workers of the Kuzbass, a major coal mining region caught up in a web of debt which has trapped even those pits and factories which could have a bright future.

Taking advantage of the loopholes left by rapid economic change, the middlemen have spread across Russia, representing a big temptation to poorly paid officials, who can share in the profits by turning a blind eye.

In a Western economy they would fit in to the normal scheme of things and laws and competition would protect industrial workers from being cheated out of the fruits of their labor.

Here, however, the workers are virtually helpless.

Outside the proscecutor's office in the regional capital Kemerovo, employees of a big chemical factory are holding a picket in the freezing cold, trying to get the authorities to take up their wage claims against their bosses.

The court accepted our claim, but nothing has been done about it, said one.

He and his fellow workers have suffered from the likes of Kostya and Vasya whom they see as another sign that some people in the new Russia are above law while others are outside it.

We wanted them to set up a barter system so that we could get goods for our products, but it turned out to be just another way of ripping us off, the worker said. But though they seem to have a free rein to go about their business, Kostya and Vasya are not without problems.

After dinner, Kostya found out that his fiancee back in Novosibiirsk had had a miscarriage and was stuck in a hospital which had a terrible reputation for patient care.

A true Mafiosi would have little trouble getting her transferred to an elite clinic. But Kostya struggled to find the phone number of a doctor friend who might be able to help, while Vasya told grim tales about medical disasters in Russian clinics.

Coming from humble stock, they can understand the nostalgia the miners feel for the communist past. They really were treated well, said Vasya. There was a sign at one of the mines we visited today which said glory to the coal miners. People really felt proud of their work. Now they should write money to the coal miners.

They are however contemptuous of the workers who have found themselves cheated out of their livelihoods by market reforms which have brought with them economic chaos and corruption. (Reuter)

Documents Seized in Corruption Case Returned to Former Antigraft Judge

BRESCIA, Italy — Prosecutors said they would return documents seized during a raid to collect evidence of corruption against the country's one time top antigraft magistrate.

Antonio di Pietro, who quit as public works minister in November following charges that he protected a corruption suspect while serving as judge, had filed an appeal following the more than 12 hours of searches on December 6.

The Brescia Court must now make a decision on the legitimacy of the searches.

Some of the material demanded by Di Pietro had already been returned on December 14, court sources said.

Di Pietro was named public works minister following the center-left's victory in April general elections, but resigned on November 14 after a judicial inquiry was opened against him.

The subject of three separate legal inquiries, Di Pietro has emerged unscathed in each case.

Political observers have suggested the investigations of Di Pietro are part of a wider attempt to undermine the legitimacy of the "clean hands" probe, which he headed.

The investigations he led triggered a political earthquake in Italy and led to landmark general elections in March 1994, won by media magnate Silvio Berlusconi.

Di Pietro quit as a magistrate two weeks before Berlusconi resigned as prime minister after an ally in his center-right coalition defected.

According to a survey of 500 people, Di Pietro was named "man of the year" with 55.3 percent of the vote, with Pope John Paul II a distant second with 25. 7 percent. (AFP)

Mixed Verdicts on Kwasniewski's Year as President



WARSAW — Aleksander Kwasniewski has grown plumper and more popular, and won applause for his foreign policy since becoming Poland's president a year ago, but his greatest challenges lie ahead.

The ex-communist, who pledged in his election campaign to heal divisions left from the pre-1989 fight for democracy and become a president of all poles, admits that he has so far failed in this respect.

Polish groups from left to right are so immersed in history and now in the (parliamentary) electoral campaign that .. party interests or thinking wins out, he told a news conference.

Several key domestic goals that Kwasniewski had promised to help achieve, such as a reform of the crumbling social security system and the drafting of a national constitution, remain unaccomplished.

This is despite the fact that unlike former President Lech Walesa, who clashed so often with leftist foes in government that poles grew weary of war at the top, Kwasniewski could work with a cabinet and Parliament dominated by his own camp.

Solidarity veterans shun olive branches.

No top veterans of the pre-1989 struggle against communism waged by Walesa's solidarity movement have accepted Kwasniewski's calls for cooperation in areas like foreign policy, where there is wide consensus.

The opposition argues that while the president has quit his ruling Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) to show he is above narrow party ties, he remains wedded to it and shrewdly promotes the political interests of the former Nomenklatura.

The rightist, pro-Roman Catholic Solidarity Election Action (AWS) opposition alliance, now ahead of the SLD in opinion polls, is embittered that he signed a law easing abortion.

It has even suggested it might seek presidential elections to get rid of Kwasniewski, once a new constitution is passed.

The first year has shown he is president of a leftist, post-communist group, that he cannot be a president of all poles as promised, said solidarity chief Marian Krzaklewski.

Kwasniewski's chance to make his mark through quiet cooperation with a friendly Parliament could end late next year, when the parties grouped around the Solidarity Union may beat his born-again social democrats in parliamentary polls.

For now Kwasniewski, 42, is riding the crest of a wave of Polish successes, whether partly his doing or not.

If you add up economic growth, lower inflation, lower unemployment, progress towards NATO and the EU, the Nobel (literature) Prize for Wislawa Szymborska and our (Olympic) gold medals in Atlanta, this was a really successful year, he said smilingly when asked to sum up his start in office.

He stresses foreign relations and has made more than 20 trips abroad, including to Washington, Moscow, Western Europe and neighboring states, skilfully promoting the key goals set out under Walesa of rapid NATO and European Union membership.

He had a clear strategy, to get to the main capitals, see all Poland's neighbors, reconcile Russia to sweeten the pill of NATO enlargement — unlike Walesa who rattled the bars of the bear's cage, said a Western diplomat, reflecting praise abroad for the smooth, well-tailored English-speaker.

Kwasniewski is proud of his own role as a champion of Ukraine's efforts to tie itself to Central and Western Europe.

Initially criticized for visiting Belarus and meeting President Alexander Lukashenko who was clashing with Parliament, Kwasniewski later initiated a joint declaration with his Lithuanian and Ukrainian counterparts in support of democracy in Belarus. That helped Poland's claims to be a regional leader.

Even opponents give him some credit for foreign policy, but domestically critics accuse him of passivity, of skirting tough issues and of relentless publicity-seeking.

Kwasniewski's foes blame him for not persuading the SLD to allow ratification of a treaty between Poland and the Vatican, a highly divisive issue which he pledged to try to resolve.

Janusz Piechocinski, deputy parliamentary chief of the SLD's coalition partner, the Polish Peasant Party, sees behind Kwasniewski's low-key approach at home a longer-term strategy first to slowly build his authority, then become more active.

Kwasniewski, who helped reform Poland's utterly discredited communists after their 1989 fall from power and led them to parliamentary election victory in 1993, is seen as an SLD Liberal — keen to eclipse its conservative left and thus promote the party's wider acceptance in society.

Under the cover of Kwasniewski's presidency there will be a move of the SLD away from the ideological side towards Liberal Social Democracy, Piechocinski said.

On a personal level, Kwasniewski has proved a survivor.

He shook off embarrassments over his misleading claims to a college degree and his personal finances which emerged before the November 1995 election, in which he narrowly beat Walesa.

He was sworn in on December 23 amid a crisis over security service allegations that his party colleague, Prime Minister Jozef Oleksy, had informed for Moscow spies.

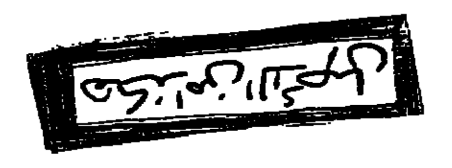
Oleksy quit, although prosecutors later ruled the evidence against him did not stand up. Kwasniewski was unscathed.

Opinion polls suggest the public, even many opposition supporters, are impressed by his performance so far.

An October survey by the Public CBOS Organization showed that 65 percent of those polled approved of his performance and 65 percent also thought he was a better president than Walesa — although his approval slipped back to 58 percent in November after the abortion law and other controversies.

It remains to be seen whether such ratings will last if, like Walesa, Kwasniewski is confronted by a hostile Parliament in the second half of his five-year term.

We will learn exactly what kind of a President Kwasniewski will be only after the next elections, when he may have to face. .. significant antipresidential forces in Parliament, the Peasant Party's Piechocinski told Reuters. (Reuter)



Baby Doll Teaches U.S. Teens About Parenthood

CHICAGO — Parenthood was tough for Teresa Pridemore, but luckily for her it only lasted three days before she had to return her little bundle to health class.

"It was hard, very hard ... You have to devote, like, all your time to this baby," the 15-year-old student at Wauconda High School in suburban Chicago said. The bawling infant she unloaded on her health teacher after one sleepless weekend was Baby Think It Over, a plastic doll being adopted by thousands of U.S. high schools to help deter teen pregnancy.

The State of Indiana began distributing 195 Baby Think It Overs to schools and counselling centers statewide this month, marking the largest organized use of the dolls to date.

"Giving young people a realistic idea of what it means to be a parent is an effective way to encourage them to delay sexual activity and parenthood until they're financially and emotionally ready for it, and hopefully married," Indiana Governor Evan Bayh, who backed the doll distribution, said.

Students in health classes using the 6-1/2-pound (2.7 kg) Baby Think It Over have to take it home for the weekend, along with all the usual gear including a car seat and a stroller. The doll cries at all hours of the day and night at random intervals determined by its computer program, and the teen parent has to hold a key in a slot in the doll's back for 15 to 20 minutes to quiet it, simulating the time and effort needed to feed, change or console a real infant.

No Baby-Sitters Allowed

The care key is attached to the student's wrist by a tamper-proof bracelet to prevent recruitment of baby-sitters.

The doll also has internal sensors to detect rough handling or extended neglect. On Monday morning, when it is returned, the health teacher downloads its internal records to find out how the student did as a part-time parent.

"They all think it's going to be really easy to have a kid.

"Then they get slapped with reality when they take this thing home ... It does seem to be getting the point across," Wauconda High health teacher Tracy Fessler said.

Baby Think It Over Inc., the Eau Claire, Wisconsin-based manufacturer, has sold more than 2,000 dolls in three years amidst continuing public concern about teenage pregnancy. But the doll has encountered criticism, said company president Mary Jurmain, who co-owns the company with her husband, Rick Jurmain, who invented the doll in their garage.

"We have had a couple of disgruntled people who felt that this sort of thing should be taught at home and only at home," she said. "But we have something of a crisis here. So I think most people understand that you teach it where you need to teach it. High school and middle school is where it's easiest to catch a whole bunch of kids."

The U.S. teenage birth rate has declined for four years in a row from a 1991 high of 62.1 births per thousand women aged 15 to 19 to last year's 56.9 per thousand, the American Academy of Pediatrics said. The drop is encouraging after years of increases through the 1980s, it said, but the number of teenagers is rising so fast that teenage births could rise again by 2000 if current rates hold steady.

No Statistics on Whether It Works

"Baby Think It Over Inc. is unable to provide statistics showing that its doll works but it encourages schools to monitor pregnancy rates before and after they start to use it in health classes. The company wants to collect the data but for now," Mary Jurmain said. "It relies on strong anecdotal evidence that baby think it over is making a big impression on thousands of teens."

The doll sells for $250. A $275 drug-dependent model that teachers call Crack Baby Think It Over is also available. Schools typically buy one doll and students take turns taking it home on the weekends. The dolls come with a pregnancy prevention curriculum teachers can use in class.

"In its suggested program, the company avoids telling teenagers how they should keep from getting pregnant — whether they should abstain or use contraception. We really try to remain neutral on that because the doll is used by such a wide variety of organizations," Jurmain said.

"The Mormon Church has bought them. Planned Parenthood has bought them. It's all over the political spectrum. So we try to stay out of the debate. The instructional materials ... focus on 'This is what it's like to have a baby and take care of it.' Students can draw their own conclusions about how they want to prevent that from happening," she said.

"The manuals also focus on the financial expenses of caring for a baby with exercises that require careful budgeting and a trip to the store for baby supplies. That's a revelation for many kids who have a very unrealistic idea of the actual costs of taking care of a baby," she said.

Bill Yundt, 15, was the first boy at Wauconda High to take Fessler up on her option to take Baby Think It Over home instead of writing a 500-word report about a disease.

"I brought it over to her house and dropped it off. It was, like, an annoyance. Having to carry it around and stuff. It just showed me I'm not ready yet. Because I'd rather be out just having fun and stuff than sitting around with this thing."

Reuter

Southeast Asia — Where Cities Choke, Forests Vanish

JAKARTA — Economic growth is surging in Southeast Asia, but at a heavy price as cities choke on car exhaust fumes and forests disappear under the saw.

But analysts see glimmers of light for the environment.

Bangkok's jam-packed streets are the most notorious. Each day more than 760 new cars take to the road and Bangkok's 10 million people make an average of 18.87 million journeys.

The Thai capital is building a mass public transport system but it is not expected to be operational until 1999. Until then people will continue to rely on cars, taxis, motorcycles and buses, whose belching exhausts poison the air and make the city a public health nightmare.

The Thai authorities said new environmental regulations should start to ease the problem next year, but effectiveness depends on enforcement, which has been lax in the past.

"Lead should not pose any problem at all next year thanks to a law requiring cars to use lead-free gasoline which has been in place since early this year," said Supat Wangwongwatana, director of air quality and noise management division in Bangkok's Pollution Control Department.

The level of carbon monoxide and dust should also drop due to various laws we currently use to curb them. But it all depends on law enforcement and traffic conditions, he said.

In neighboring Malaysia, the streets of the capital Kuala Lumpur are rapidly approaching Bangkok levels of congestion, but earlier this month the city opened a multibillion-dollar electric rail network aimed at reducing the inflow of traffic.

There are seven million vehicles on the road in Malaysia — an average of one vehicle for every three people. Some 250 people died in road accidents in November, officials said.

Opposition politicians say, however, that there is a major snag to the light rail transit (LRT) project — price.

At 75 Malaysian cents (U.S.$0.30) for a ride between two stations a mile (1.6 km) apart, the rail service is exorbitantly-priced, opposition politicians say.

Officials responsible for the project said they were confident the public would prefer the rail service, which runs above the city's traffic carrying 16,000 passengers an hour, to buses and taxis which are much slower and unreliable.

Prime minister Mahathir Mohamad's government has also been promoting liquefied natural gas (LNG) as fuel for cars, saying emissions are safer than those from gasoline.

National car company Proton has spearheaded the campaign by introducing more LNG-powered cars.



Will we get the environment back?

While Southeast Asia's cities have been gasping for air under a growing cloud of exhaust fumes, there is carnage in the region's forests, although here, too, there are signs things may be taking a turn for the better.

Jeffrey Sayer, director-general of the Bogor-based Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR) in Indonesia, said the issue was not halting deforestation but the amount of forest, the type of forest left and where it is located.

"It is unrealistic to think there will not be a lot more forest cleared, but it is important that you do safeguard a certain amount of forests for environmental reasons and biodiversity," Sayer told Reuters.

It is wrong to just portray the problem of forests as a problem with logging of natural forests as it's a problem of competition for land use.

It's a much bigger problem than good or bad logging. The real long-term problems are outside the forestry sector.

Increasing population puts pressure on agricultural production which increases the demand for land and leads to forest depletion. Relaxing trade barriers also has an effect.

Areas opened up by commercial logging are often then exploited by shifting agriculture leading to more devastation and mismanagement or over-exploitation of resources.

One recent significant development is Indonesia's plan to cut down one million hectares of forest in Kalimantan on Borneo island to convert the land to rice production.

Much has been made of this plan as a way of making up for the shortfall in rice production and achieving Indonesia's aim of rice self-sufficiency, a keystone in the government's attempts to feed a population nearing 200 million.

"If they can have sustainable rice production on that land it is not such a bad thing. The problem is whether it is all suitable. What I suspect is that some of it is and some of it isn't," Sayer said. He argues for a thorough study of the project to determine which land is suitable and which is not.

The yield for agricultural crops is not increasing fast enough, so there has to be more land cultivated, he said.

But in some areas there are emerging positive trends.

Forest depletion in Malaysia, for example, is declining when those who had previously engaged in shifting agriculture find alternative employment in plantations, sawmills and factories.

"It appears that the depletion of forests tends to go hand in hand with certain early stages of development," Sayer said.

In Thailand, where jobs are increasing, people are turning away from agriculture and moving to the cities. Those left behind are increasingly cultivating alternative crops, such as strawberries, under government sponsored programs.

However, in Burma, the rush for quick profits is depleting forests that had been carefully managed for more than 140 years.

But forested areas are increasing in places like Java and southern China through government policies that make it profitable to cultivate plantations and make longer-term plans.

But for biodiversity it is much more important to get forests that are in the right places and as little modified from the natural state as possible, he said.

(Reuter)

Internet, On-Line Industry Satisfied With New Copyright Treaty

WASHINGTON — An international coalition of trade associations, Internet and On-line associations expressed satisfaction at the approval recently of a digital copyright treaty.

The ad hoc copyright coalition said it was pleased that the agreement worked out in Geneva by the World Intellectual Property Organization did not contain "Article Seven."

The provision, initially part of the proposed treaty text and actively opposed by Internet service providers and telecommunications companies, would have applied copyright protection to "temporary" copies made with each tap on the keyboard.

"Forcing transmission companies to try to read and evaluate every Internet transmission could have ground the Internet to a halt," argued MCI chief technology counsel Timothy Casey.

A coalition statement here said copyright scholars, librarians and scientists had lobbied delegates in Geneva on the impact of curbs on temporary computer copying of materials transmitted over the Internet.

It says: "The treaty language would permit the use of technology to develop copyright protection mechanisms of the future."

"The signing of this treaty is an important step towards the development of technological solutions to further balance the interests of copyright owner with the free flow of data and information on the Internet," said Peter Harter, public policy counsel of Netscape Communications.

(AFP)

Skull Casts Doubt on When Blacks Arrived in U.S.

HAVANA — An ancient human skull unearthed last month near Mantazas, a provincial capital east of Havana, is about 1,100 years old, scientists here said in a discovery that would contradict historical accounts.

The consensus among scientists today is that blacks came to the new world as slaves after the arrival of Christopher Columbus in 1492.

But that view could change with the discovery of a skull with Negroid features believed to be about 1,100 years old, the weekly magazine *Juventud Rebelde*.

Belonging to an adult male, the skull was unearthed at an archaeological excavation site in an ancient burial ground near mantazas.

(AFP)



UN Renews Cyprus Force Looks to New Negotiations

UNITED NATIONS — The Security Council renewed the mandate of the 1,200-member UN peacekeeping force in Cyprus until June 30, 1997 and called for steps to facilitate a new diplomatic drive to reunite the divided island.

The resolution was adopted unanimously, without any speeches.

Cyprus has been virtually partitioned into a Greek Cypriot south and a Turkish Cypriot north since troops from Turkey landed in 1974 in reaction to a coup in Nicosia backed by the military junta then ruling Greece.

The UN Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP) was deployed in 1964 to halt violence between the two communities after a government comprising representatives of both broke up three years after independence from Britain.

The council resolution deplored a series of incidents in recent months in which three Greek Cypriot civilians and a Turkish Cypriot soldier were killed, saying violence along the cease-fire lines had reached a level not seen since 1974.

It called on both sides to accept a package of measures designed to ease tensions, including unmanning military posts in close proximity, barring the presence of loaded weapons along the cease-fire lines and adopting a code of conduct based on minimal force and proportional response.

It also reiterated grave concern over the excessive levels of military forces and armaments and lack of progress towards a significant reduction in the number of foreign troops. The council called on all concerned to commit themselves to a reduction in defense spending and in the foreign troop strength.

The Greek Cypriot-led government recently acquired a number of tanks and other heavy weapons and is reported to be planning to buy Russian-made S-300 air defense missiles, while some 30,000 Turkish troops are still in northern Cyprus.

The council reiterated that the present situation on the island is unacceptable and welcomed efforts by the UN special representative for Cyprus, Han Sung-Joo of South Korea, to prepare the ground for open-ended direct negotiations in the first half of 1997 between the leaders of the two communities on an overall settlement.

The head of the internationally recognized government in Nicosia, President Glafcos Clerides, heads the Greek Cypriot community. Turkish Cypriot leader Rauf Denktash is president of a breakaway government recognized only by Turkey.

The United States and Britain, whose foreign secretary recently visited the island for the first time in 30 years, are also helping prepare the ground for new negotiations.

The Security Council reaffirmed that a decision by the European Union to open negotiations with Cyprus — probably in late 1997 or early 1998 — on EU membership was an important new development that should facilitate an overall settlement.

The EU issue added urgency to the planned inter-communal negotiations since continued division of the island would complicate Cyprus's efforts to join the European grouping. The Turkish Cypriots say they will strengthen their links with Turkey if the Nicosia government tries to take the still-partitioned island into the EU.

(Reuter)

Nearly Half Serbians Back Protests

BELGRADE — An opinion poll released showed nearly half the Serbians questioned supported street protests against alleged electoral fraud that have shaken President Slobodan Milosevic's nine-year-long rule.

The partner marketing agency conducted the independent telephone poll of 1,019 people between December 13 and 16, when the daily demonstrations had already been going for more than three weeks.

Zajedno coalition of opposition parties have attracted up to a quarter of a million supporters in Belgrade alone, and have spread to dozens of other towns across Serbia.

The partner survey showed clear divisions of opinion according to the respondants' source of news, and their age.

Of those who obtained their news from the state-run national daily *Politika* newspaper, 45 percent were opposed to the marches, West.

According to the survey, age also played a role.

Fifty-four percent of over 56-year-olds were against the protests, compared to 25 percent who supported them. Official media are traditionaly favored by older readers.

The ratio was reversed amongst the 18 to 35-year-olds.

Sixty-one percent were for and 15 percent were against.



Asked their opinion of the protests, 47 percent said they either fully or mostly supported them, compared to 33 percent who were mostly or totaly opposed.

The demonstrations erupted when electoral commissions controlled by the ruling Socialist Party reversed opposition victories in 15 key towns and cities, including Belgrade, in state-wide local elections on November 17.

The protests organized by the and 32 percent backed them.

But 83 percent of the readers of the largest independent daily, *Nasa Borba*, supported the protests, while six percent said they were against them.

State-controlled media, which dominate the nation's news, have pushed stories of the protests to inside pages, and portrayed protests as insignificant but violent events staged by traitors to the Serbian cause and servants of the

In the past, pollsters in Serbia have struggled to overcome public suspicion, which has tended to skew results in favor of the authorities and made accurate surveys difficult.

But political analysts said the survey seemed to confirm an opposition belief that they had widespread backing even in rural and industrial areas that have traditionaly supported the ruling Socialist Party.

Children Suffer in Flood of Rwanda Refugees



NGARA, Tanzania — Red Cross workers struggling to cope with a human tide of Rwandan refugees returning home reported an alarming rise in the numbers of children separated from their parents.

We've had 1,583 inquiries for missing children. Out of 674 children registered as lost, 164 have been reunited with their parents, International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) delegate Justin Cockerell told Reuters. These numbers are alarming.

He said 494 of the lost children had been taken across the nearby border into Rwanda, where ICRC teams would try to trace their parents among the hundreds of thousands of refugees who have flooded back to Rwanda in the past week.

In some cases, aid workers said, exhausted parents had deliberately abandoned their children because they were confident they would be fed and cared for by Red Cross teams.

Estimates of the total of refugees crossing back into Rwanda from Tanzania topped 360,000 on Sunday.

Cockerell said there were 50,000 more refugees stretching in a long column along the roads leading to the Rusomo border crossing.

The flood began a week ago, after Tanzanian authorities tired of playing host to the Rwandan refugees, gave them until the end of December to quit the country, their home for the past two years.

Despite the size of the exodus there were few problems, Cockerell said, and the area was calm. Many of the refugees, however, were visibly exhausted after trekking for days from the refugee camps where they used to live.

Some refugees had committed suicide rather than go back to Rwanda, apparently fearing retribution for the genocide in which about 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus died in 1994.

One aid official told Reuters 20 suicides had been reported from the Kitali camp alone. He said aid workers checking the now-deserted camps had found the bodies of several Rwandans who had hanged themselves there. Last week about 10,000 refugees were rounded up by Tanzanian soldiers from a forest area near the Kitali camp, where they had been holding out, and ordered to walk to Rwanda.

Aid officials said their leaders were Hutu extremists who feared to return to Rwanda because of their alleged involvement in the 1994 genocide.

On Sunday a heavy rainstorm halted the movement of refugees towards the Rwanda border, forcing many of them to shelter under scraps of plastic sheeting.

UN refugee officials handed out packets of high-energy biscuits to exhausted groups of refugees, many of whom said they had been on the road for more than a week. Aid workers were taken by surprise last weekend when the exodus of refugees began, from the Benaco camp. But they quickly organized food supplies and transport facilities to help the returning Rwandans.

Lines of trucks waited at the Rusomo border to transport many of the refugees back to their former home areas. Others, who originally came from villages near the border, continued on foot.

(Reuter)

Security Council Disbands Still-Born Multinational Force

UNITED NATIONS — The UN Security Council formally disbanded a month-old multinational force for Zaire which was wound up before being fully deployed, Western diplomats said.

The multinational force was authorized by Security Council Resolution 1080 on November 16, at the height of the refugee crisis in eastern Zaire as hundreds of thousands of mainly Rwandan Hutu refugees were forced out of their camps by fighting between rebel Tutsis and the Zairean Army.

The Canadian-led force was originally intended to be 10,000 strong and planned to open up humanitarian corridors to help relief agencies operate and assist the repatriation of the refugees.

Only several hundred troops were ever deployed by the Kampala-based multinational force, with its operational wing at the Ugandan capital's airport at Entebbe, and negotiations on dropping supplies to refugees from planes or setting up ground corridors got nowhere.

The Security Council acted to formally wind up the force on Monday, after the Canadian government on December 13 informed UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali that the force as authorized no longer served any purpose.

Council president Paolo Fulci of Italy informed Boutros-Ghali in a letter approved on Monday that "the members of the Security Council take note of the view of the government of Canada expressed in the letter of December 13, 1996 and they agree that the functions of the multinational force have therefore come to an end."

Boutros-Ghali noted in a report to the Security Council that an estimated 560,000 refugees had returned to Rwanda from eastern Zaire, and more than 235,000 from Tanzania.

The UN chief in his report said he was "not in a position to recommend to the council the establishment of a United Nations operation to follow on from the multinational force." (AFP)

China Stops 68 People Fleeing to Australia

Hong Kong — Chinese authorities have stopped 68 people from trying to leave the country by boat for Australia.

The 68 people, consisting of 40 men, 15 women and 13 children, were intercepted by coastal patrol boats at the sea over the weekend, the China-backed *Ta Kung Pao* daily said.

Each of the would-be illegal immigrants reportedly paid 8,000 yuan ($970) to a Beihai-based trafficker identified as Cai Jiang, to take them to Australia, the report said.

The majority of them were farmers from the booming southern coastal cities of Fangsheng, Qingzhou, Beihai and Hepu in Guangxi Province which borders Vietnam, the report said. (AFP)



Moscow to Celebrate 850th Birthday in Grand Style

MOSCOW – When Prince Yury Dolgoruky of Vladimir wrote to his brother Prince Svyatoslav on July 27, 1147 suggesting they meet at a wooden fortress on the escarpment of the River Moskva, he did not know he was making history.

His letter was the first recorded reference to the city of Moscow and 1147 has since been considered the official founding year of the borough destined to become the capital of a world uperpower.

In recent history Moscow's birthday is commemorated at the beginning of September, usually in a rather quiet symbolic form.

But next year the city is to mark its 850th anniversary in grand style.

The dynamic and ambitious Mayor Yury Luzhkov is organizing a string of festivities, including a three-day party, and has ordered a major face lift for the city, eager to shed its drab communist-era image.

Hundreds of thousands, may be up to a million people are busy, putting the final touches to the celebration program, said Igor Ponomaryov, head of a Moscow city government department created to organize the event.

Something for everyone planned by decree, Russian President Boris Yeltsin has set the date for the huge birthday party. September 5, a Friday, will be the main day of celebration, followed by a weekend of both solemn and informal activities.

There will be a main event on red square, certain to include all of Russia's political and cultural elite.

This will be a very dignified event, Ponomaryov told Reuters. He did not want to give details because they had not been finalized.

Other celebrations include a commemoration of the dead and survivors of World War II – known here as the great patriotic war – who defended their country and its capital against German troops.

Every part of town has plans for its own festivities, Ponomaryov said. Each cinema, museum, theater, gallery and cultural institution is set to participate.

Moscow school children will be given special lessons on their city and there are plans for programs for the elderly and needy.

Landmarks renovated Moscow expects hundreds of thousands of tourists from home and abroad, including those attending a United Nations-sponsored meeting of mayors from the world's largest cities.



Luzhkov, the mastermind of Moscow's architectural rebirth after the end of communism in 1991, has launched operation bright facade, a campaign to repaint some of Moscow's historic landmarks.

Among them is the grey Stalinist-era house on the embankment, the former residence of prominent Bolsheviks and Soviet apparatchiks now rented out to rich new russians.

Experts still have to decide on the precise shade, but the color is expected to harmonize with the newly-built Christ the saviour cathedral on the opposite side of the River Moskva, close to the Kremlin.

The church, another brainchild of the popular mayor, is a replica of the 19th Century monument destroyed on the orders of dictator Josef Stalin in 1931 and replaced with a public swimming pool after his original plan to build a huge palace fell through.

In five years in office, 60-year-old Luzhkov has won much acclaim for his efforts to clean and spruce up Moscow, which is officially home to some nine million and unofficially up to 13 million inhabitants.

Luzhkov, who is seen by some in Russia see as Yeltsin's successor in the Kremlin, was reelected in June with nearly 90 percent of the vote.

The huge celebration party, sure to enhance Luzhkov's high-profile style, is an expensive affair. Ponomaryov refused to disclose the overall cost.

It is big money, he said, adding that the original finance plan has been scaled down because money was tight.

The economic situation is not very easy but rather complex, he continued, referring to a budgetary crisis that has left millions of russian workers and soldiers unpaid.

Moscow has attracted private sponsors for the celebrations, among them foreign companies like Coca-Cola and Pepsi-Cola.

Operation bright facade is also a joint venture. Ponomaryov said Russian and foreign firms were covering 70 percent of the overall costs in return for property and leasing rights.

Other private companies are hoping to profit from the celebration. Cups, watches, posters, t-shirts and other memorabilia decorated with officially approved birthday logos are already on sale. (Reuter)

Rebels Drag Peru Hostage Crisis Into 11th Day

LIMA – Marxist rebels dragged the Japanese Embassy siege into a 11th day on Saturday, stubbornly ignoring pressure from the Peruvian government and the Catholic church to release more than a hundred vip hostages.

The Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement (MRTA) rebels freed just one hostage on Thursday.

Holed-up inside the fortified compound that they have have booby-trapped and mined against a possible police offensive, the roughly 20 heavily-armed guerrillas have freed three hostages since the mass release on Sunday of 225 captives.

In a sign of frustration with the deadlock, Japan's Foreign Minister Yukihiko Ikeda called on Friday on members of the group of seven (G-7) industrialized nations to intervene to help solve the siege, which involves about 30 Japnese.

It is clear that the international community should not condone terrorism. It is also necessary for the international community to help resolve this crisis by setting free the hostages peacefully, and at an early date, Ikeda said, adding Tokyo had already consulted other nations in the group.

Fearing the crisis might not be resolved quickly, Japan has said Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto and Ikeda were both considering cancelling foreign trips planned for January.

Peru's President Alberto Fujimori has so far turned down foreign offers of military help and Russian leader Boris Yeltsin's suggestion to send a special G-7 task force to free the hostages brought no official response from Lima.

The rebels, who initially seized more than 500 guests at a lavish reception in the ambassador's home, have kept those they consider most useful as bargaining chips, including top Peruvian government officials, ambassadors and Japanese businessmen.

Catholic bishop Juan Luis Cipriani, who entered the compound for the second day on Thursday, appealed to the rebels to examine their consciences and end the siege.

Let us hope that their hearts will be moved, Cipriani said, adding Pope John Paul was following the crisis closely and praying for the victims.

The guerrillas freed Guatemalan Ambassador, Jose Maria Argueta on Thursday. The gesture was to show their support for the peace treaty between his government and the country's Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unit (GRNG) rebels, to be signed on Dec. 29, according to Argueta.

The rebels have warned their 103 captives will not leave the Japanese ambassdor's residence until the government frees more than 400 of their jailed comrades.

Fujimori has flatly rejected the rebels' demands, telling them to lay down their arms and release all their captives if they want to avoid the use of force.

He also ignored pleas by hostages to reconnect services to the building where the captives use flashlights after dark.

Isaac Velazco, the MRTA's self-styled international spokesman, told Reuters by telephone from Hamburg, Germany that his comrades in the residence would hold out for as long as it took to secure the release of rebels held in Peruvian jails.

We will be waiting. The Peruvian people have suffered 500 years of exploitation so we have all the time in the world, he said, accusing the government of provoking a bloody, military solution instead of negotiating.

According to Cipriani the hostages are in good health but a loud explosion on Thursday night inside the pitch-black compound led to fears for the safety of the mainly vip captives.

Cipriani, who entered the compound for the second day Thursday, told reporters the captives were not hurt.

They are well, they are calm, they are firm, he said.

Red Cross officials said the explosion may have been caused by an animal stepping on a mine near the building. The rebels are armed with grenades, explosives and ample ammunition and have booby-trapped entrances to the building, freed hostages have said.

A Canadian priest arrived from his parish in Lima's poorest shanty-town to hold a mass outside the besieged residence in the early hours on Friday.

It is more and more important to keep praying. The situation is getting more delicate, churchman Gregorio Chiswood said, as the songs of his church's choir drifted towards the hostages.

The crisis began when the rebels stormed the residence during a smart party on Dec.17.

Neighbours of the besieged residence have become increasingly frustrated at the length of the siege. World media interest in the crisis has turned their leafy suburb into the crowded, grubby home of hundreds of journalists permanently camped at the site.

You lot are the terrorists. I've had 10 days and 10 nights of this racket now and I don't want to put up with it one more minute, one neighbour, who refused to give her name, shouted at journalists. (Reuter)

Guatemala Guerrillas Face Peace With Confidence

ESCUINTLA, Guatemala – After 36 years of fighting in one of the most blood-stained countries of Latin America, Guatemalan guerrillas are full of confidence about the signing of a historic peace treaty to end the war on Sunday.

In a rebel camp this week, members of the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unit (URNG) celebrated with dancing, soccer matches and rollicking Christmas parties as if peace had already arrived.

If it were not for the 36 years of struggle, we never would have gotten to the negotiating table, a stocky guerrilla known as Captain Pancho told Reuters. We now have a base for building a democratic society.

After five often-rocky years of negotiations, the rebels and the government were due to sign a treaty bringing a definitive end to the war on Sunday in a ceremony in Guatemala city attended by heads of state and international dignitaries.

Pancho is among 80 guerrillas, mostly of Indian descent, preparing for peace in Elvira Camp, a month-old encampment of rudimentary shelters and hammock beds in wooded hills only 36 miles (60 km) from the capital.

Until very recently, the guerrillas would have kept their guns strapped on as they danced over Christmas. Their camp would have been farther away from large towns, heavily guarded and secretive.

This year the guerrillas stored their arms in a shelter and cranked up a battery-operated radio. A generator provided lights on the dance floor and laughter was loud and unrestrained while the guerrillas whacked at pinatas, colorful vessels hung high and filled with gifts or candy.

Rebel family members, as well as sympathizers from local villages, came into the camp for the party and a friendly soccer match with the guerrillas. A lieutenant named Lima said it would not have been good public relations to beat the locals. Perhaps he was justifying the result – a two-two tie.

Despite approaching peace, however, the rebels are not dropping their guard.

In the mornings, troops were up in formation by 7 a.m. they then crawled through the undergrowth with loaded rifles in exercises that their officers said were aimed at keeping them combat-prepared to the bitter end.

Some 140,000 have died or disappeared during the war, many massacred by the army in the early 1980s, when a brutal counterinsurgency campaign reached its height.

The population of this camp will swell to 300 or more in January when it becomes one of eight around the country where the guerrillas will gather to officially turn in weapons under the scrutiny of international monitors.

The guerrillas will then be free to return to normal lives, no longer wanted by the state for rebellion, sedition and other political crimes. But few of the combatants in Elvira Camp plan to seek normal jobs.

We will continue following the guerrilla high command, and organize the political party, a lieutenant known by his nom-de-guerre arturo said, referring to the URNG's plans to enter politics and field candidates in national elections.

Most of the other young to middle-aged guerrillas – including eight women – said they would do political work with the URNG after peace, or join other guerrilla agricultural or small manufacturing cooperative businesses.

Under peace promises from the government, the guerrillas expect help with land and housing, and some said they would go to school.

Elvira camp will watch the peace accord signing on television in the hills, while exiled guerrilla commanders will return from Mexico to attend the actual ceremony. (Reuter)

Ruling Party Denies Anti-Santa Claus Campaign

SARAJEVO — Bosnia's ruling Party for Democratic Action (SDA) denied accusations that it was waging an anti-Santa Claus campaign in Sarajevo.

"The SDA has not begun, nor will it begin actions against the celebration of Christmas in public places," the SDA wrote in a statement to the AFP.

While Santa Claus and Saint Nicholas are not part of the Bosnian culture, end-of year celebrations were citizens' private affairs, the SDA wrote.

The denial follows a request by Michael Steiner, deputy to top Western peace envoy Carl Bildt, that the SDA should make clear its position on Santa Claus and reports of SDA efforts to ground the celebrations.

UN spokesman Alexander Ivanko said that supporters of Alija Izetbegovic had been going around primary schools urging them not to allow the local version of Santa Claus, old man frost, to bring presents to children.

The traditional figure was "an increasingly political issue," Ivanko said. "It's a real campaign against Santa Claus, and you can't find any pictures of him in town," he said.

"I think the best thing would be if the SDA now, very quickly, distances itself from these rumors about the position of the leadership of the Bosnian side vis-a-vis Santa Claus," he said, before leaving on holiday.

